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OR, THE WOLF in the FOLD.

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AUTHOR OF "DETECTIVE DICK," "BILLY BAG-
GAGE," "BOB ROCKETT," "WILL
WILDFIRE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ARREST ON SUSPICION.

IN the back settlements of that wild Western State from which hails the famous "Arkansas Traveler," the condition of society was, not many years in the past, of a decidedly primitive character. Whisky, that bane of the new settlements, largely replaced water as a beverage; bluff and poker were among the most ordinary occupations; the pistol and bowie-knife were every-day "tools of trade," and sudden deaths

LIKE A FEATHER, TOM'S BODY, DEAD OR INSENSIBLE, WAS WHIRLED UPWARD INTO THE AIR, AND CARRIED AWAY IN THE HEART OF THE FRIGHTFUL WIND.

were so common that Judge Lynch became a very important member of the community.

He had duties in another direction at the date of the opening of our story. Horse-thefts had become unpleasantly frequent, and it was very evident that a few hangings were needed to clear the moral atmosphere of the State.

The written laws did not make a horse-theft a hanging matter; but the unwritten laws did, and there was no hesitation in putting them into effect. Ropes were not expensive, a judge and jury were to be had for the asking, and the religious doctrine of the community was, that there was more room for a horse-thief in the next world than in this.

This feeling was strongly entertained in the small town of Mayville, in the eastern district of the State, where a number of valuable horses had been lost without a clue to the "gentlemen of industry" who had made way with them. Colonel Levi Brown, the leading spirit in the place, declared that "he would hang with his own hands the first of these infernal thieves that he could lay hold of."

Mayville, despite its pleasant name, was not a pleasant place. Whisky enough was consumed there in a year to float a man-of-war; gambling was as common as eating, and the pop of the pistol was heard almost nightly, in certain saloons of the town.

The "accidents" which happened in these saloons, however, attracted but little attention. They were looked upon as entirely in the way of trade. It was sad, it is true, that certain worthy citizens suddenly "pegged out," but it wouldn't have happened if they had been at home attending to their legitimate business.

Their friends and neighbors followed them to the grave, shed some tears over the unavoidable accident, and then retired to the saloon, swearing to get even with somebody, and ready to wile away the time with a quiet game of bluff.

At the date of the opening of our story, however, an event of a different character occurred, which roused the people of Mayville as they had not been stirred up for years. John Huntly, one of the oldest and most respected citizens of the town, was found dead, murdered in cold blood!

The facts of the case were not very clear. The wife of the old man had long been dead. His two sons were married and living in houses of their own. Only an aged and rather deaf housekeeper resided with him, and she had slept undisturbed through the whole occurrence.

All that can be said is that the old man was reputed to keep a considerable sum of money in his house, and had some valuable horses in his stable. He had been found, one morning, lying at the foot of his stairway, stone dead, with a knife wound in his breast, and a pool of blood on the floor beneath him.

There had evidently been a struggle. His clothes were torn, and the blue impress of finger-marks were on his throat, while a contusion on his head looked as if he had fallen or been flung down-stairs. But the murderer had vanished and left no evidence as to who he was, or what was his purpose.

The horses still stood in their stalls in the stable. As to the money, no one knew whether the story about old Huntly's money had any basis in fact. The furniture was disturbed in the bedroom of the murdered man, but that might have been done in the struggle, though there were some indications of a search.

The whole affair was a mystery which gave no signs of being quickly cleared up. The motive for the deed was not apparent. Old Huntly had not been a man to make enemies. No one had been seen lurking near the house. Suspicion had nowhere to rest.

Yet a high state of alarm and a fierce indignation prevailed in the community. The people felt that no one was safe if murder could be thus quietly and easily committed, and the friends of the murdered man were bitter in their thirst for revenge.

Several doubtful characters were arrested on suspicion. But as no evidence could be brought against them, and most of them prove an *alibi*, they were all discharged.

One of these suspected characters, Jake Bruce, a man who had anything but a savory reputation, and had been seized on general principles, protested that he knew nothing about the matter, and that "he would be even" with any man who dared throw dirt on his character.

"Blast yer ugly carcasses!" he furiously ejaculated, "you'd best ax afore you snatch. If you'd come to me like gentlemen I'd told you where I was that night, but I dunno as I feel like givin' you any information."

"We've got you, anyhow, Jake," said the

sheriff. "You're a hard case at best, and you can't deny it, and we'll hold on to you till we've had time to look into your record. Folks say that you can't show a clean sheet."

"Folks be durned!" roared Jake. "If I've got a graveyard six feet deep with corpses, that's got nothing to do with *this* case, has it?"

"Where were you that night? That's the first point to be settled," said the sheriff, impatiently. "If you can prove an *alibi*, well and good. If not—"

"There ain't no not about it. Ask Tony Blink here where I was the night old Huntly passed in his checks."

The man referred to, a thin-faced, red-whiskered chap, came forward.

"I've got to tell the truth for Jake, even if he did eucher me out of ten dollars that very night," he said, in a husky voice. "Last Tuesday night, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, that night Jake and me, we had a quiet game over at my house. My wife can tell you that same. He cheated, shoot him, but for all that I won ten dollars."

"Cause my cheatin' couldn't hold a candle to yourn," muttered Jake.

"That's all gammon. But the fact is, gentlemen, when we got through he didn't have ten cents to take up his chips. It was the ugliest bit of bare-faced euchering I've seen for a year."

"Put a stopper on all that," exclaimed the sheriff, impatiently. "When did you wind up this game?"

"The clock struck one before we cried quits."

"But the murder probably took place at a later hour. What became of Jake Bruce after the game? Did he go home?"

"No. I put him to bed."

"And when did you see him again?"

"At six o'clock next morning."

"Then your *alibi* isn't worth a pinch of snuff. He had five good hours to work in."

"That depends," answered Tony, with a saucy curl of the lip. "It might be as well for you to ask a few questions more before you settle the case. You don't want to know why I put him to bed instead of sending him home?"

"Well, why?"

"Because he was so b'ilin' full of whisky that he couldn't have walked ten steps without making a hole in the ground with his head. He was just about the drunkest man I ever see'd. Him murder anybody that night! Why, he couldn't have made a dent with his thumb in a hunk of cheese."

The sheriff was visibly impressed with this testimony, but he put another question:

"He may have sobered in the night. What was his condition in the morning?"

"He was as drunk as a hog that's just swallowed a pail of whisky. It was more trouble to put him on his legs than to raise a meetin'-house, and I had to 'most carry him home."

Tony's wife being sent for, gave testimony to the same effect, and as the search of the prisoner had yielded nothing suspicious, he was discharged, swearing bitter vengeance against the law and all its minions.

"Talk 'bout the liberty of a 'Merican citizen!" he ejaculated. "He's got the liberty to be snatched by every galoot that's got an ax to grind. But, by the blessed St. Peter, I'll show you—"

The conclusion of his threat was lost in the air, as he rolled into the street, too full of whisky to walk straight. He perambulated down the avenue, swearing profusely, and hinting darkly that he would bring the President and the Supreme Court to his aid as an injured citizen of the great United States.

These threats continued till he reached his home. This was a dwelling on the outskirts of the town, one in which respectability seemed to strive hard with shiftlessness. It was evident that other hands than those of Jake Bruce were concerned in its management.

Jake seemed to sober up considerably on entering the house. His wife stood before him, a faded, miserable-looking drudge, who had evidently once been handsome.

"Well, old woman," he ejaculated, with an effort at good humor, "that jig's up. Durn the ugly picters, I knowed they couldn't hold me."

"How was it, Jake? How did you get off?" she asked, with no great show of interest.

"Guv 'em an *alibi*, if you know what that is. Showed 'em a man couldn't be in two places at once. Where's that boy?"

"Oh, he's just back there, reading."

"That's what he's allers at. That's what you brung him up to. Stir up there, you lazy bound!

I'll burn every thunderin' book in the house if you don't stop it. Can't you find nothin' better to do nor to be swallerin' all that book slop?"

"I might spend my time swallowing whisky, like you do, dad," came a clear, firm voice from the corner. "But I don't believe there's enough money in the house to set us both up in that line."

As he spoke the owner of this voice came forward, still holding a book in his hand, with a finger in to mark the place.

He was a well-grown boy, of possibly eighteen or nineteen years of age. Tall, straight as an arrow, of shapely figure, and handsome, intelligent face. He seemed to possess much of the lost beauty of his mother.

"Don't you be callin' yer daddy a drunkard, or I'll bu'st yer figur'head, d'ye hear that?" roared Jake, angrily. "Ye're gettin' sassy 'cause ye'r' gettin' big, are ye? S'pose ye think I can't wollop yer any longer?"

"Oh, let the boy be!" cried Mrs. Bruce. "You're always kicking up a fight with him."

"I'm goin' to be boss of this shanty as long as I stand on two legs, an' you kin put that in yer pipe and smoke it."

"Come, dad, there ain't any use kicking up a row about nothing, as I can see," said the boy, without flinching.

"Little you keer fer yer old dad, blast you!" roared Jake, with an ugly look on his face. "Here they snatch me up fur murderin' old Huntly, and you don't take enough stock in it to drop that blazin' book, and toddle down ter see what was goin' on. S'pose if they'd lynched me you wouldn't 'a' come out ter see the fun."

"I judged I'd best stay home," answered the lad. "They might have asked me some questions which I would rather not answer."

"What the blue blazes do you mean?" cried Jake, starting forward and catching the boy by the shoulders, while he fixed his eyes threateningly on his face. "See here, Tom, I won't stand no slurs, mind that. If you've got anything to say, come, out with it."

Tom faced his irate father without budging or lowering his eyes.

"You say you proved that you were somewhere else the night of the murder. You weren't home that night. Where were you?"

"At Tony Blink's, and as drunk as a bee in a whisky-barrel. Tony come up like a man, and swore that he put me to bed boozy, and he woke me up boozy, and that I was so blazin' drunk all night I couldn't took ten steps 'thout standin' on my top-knot. What yer got to say to that?"

"Only that Tony Blink lied, and it was best I wasn't there," answered Tom firmly.

A look of fear, followed by one of rage, came into Jake's sullen eyes. He shook the boy furiously, and clinched his heavy fist as if to strike him. But a sudden revulsion of feeling seeming to come over him, he released his captive, withdrew a step, and seated himself on a chair by the wall.

"May I be shot for a pirate if I know what nonsense ye're gettin' through yer brain-pan," he muttered.

"I saw you at four o'clock that morning, dad," said the boy, in a firm voice. "And you wasn't in bed at Tony Blink's and you wasn't drunk. That's why I stayed home to-day."

Jake turned pale on hearing these words. He grasped the arm of his chair for support, and blurted out, with a laugh of derision:

"How's that, Susan? I thought you allers had to pound this chap with a brickbat to git him up at seven o'clock, and here he's blowin' about bein' up at four, A. M. That's more o' them books. He's been dreamin', and had the nightmare."

"I can be up as early as anybody where there's use for it. I was after our cow that morning, that lost herself the day before. And I saw you, dad, plain as I see you now, skrooching along, back of the Blue Boar Hotel."

"It's an infernal lie!" yelled Jake, springing to his feet. "And I'll bu'st yer everlasting b'iler if you say it ag'in, either here or anywhere? It must 'a' been somebody else you seed. How could you be sure of anybody, a night like that, as black as a nigger's hide?"

"I don't intend to tell it anywhere else, dad, if I can help it. And I don't s'pose you had anything to do with murdering Mr. Huntly. But my eyes never went back on me yet, and the night wasn't so black but I could see a hole through a ladder."

Jake made no response. He sat back in his chair as if lost in deep thought, his face working curiously. Tom, after waiting a moment, went back into his corner, and buried himself again in his book. All parties seemed willing to drop the subject for the present.

CHAPTER II.

A MURDER INVESTIGATION.

THE town of Mayville could boast no expert detectives; yet it was not without a sprinkling of wide-awake, common-sense citizens, who had their wits about them in an emergency.

A group of these had gathered at the house of the murdered man, for the purpose of consultation and investigation. Chief among them was Col. Levi Brown, a large-framed, full-faced individual, who evidently "felt his oats." There was a look of importance about him from head to foot.

The house stood alone, at some distance from the town. It was a square, frame mansion, of ample size for that locality, with outbuildings, and a large stable back of it, surrounded by green fields.

The party now stood near the spot where the murdered man had been found lying in his blood. The pine wood of the floor had drank in the blood till it showed a permanent red stain.

They were debating the question as to whether the murder had taken place at the foot of the stairs, or at the top, the body being afterward flung down.

At this juncture a man at the head of the stairs called out that he had found some spots of blood on the side wall, as if they had spurted in that direction.

A closer observation of the upper steps also revealed some new facts. Mrs. Warren, the housekeeper, had not the reputation of being a very careful cleaner, and the stairs showed signs of sadly needing soap and water, with the exception of the center part of two or three near the top, which were much cleaner than the others.

"There has been blood spilt here," remarked one of the party, "and they have taken the trouble to wash it up."

"It looks like it; but, what for? These fellows couldn't have had much time for amusement of that sort. What did they expect to gain by that?"

"To make a false scent," answered Colonel Levi in his positive manner. "There's nothing like a false scent to throw the hounds off the track. That much is settled, anyhow. Huntly wasn't killed at the bottom, but at the top of the stairs. Now where is the cloth that this washing was done with? That is worth looking for."

The door of the murdered man's room opened upon a hall, about six or eight feet from the head of the stairs. It was probable that a struggle which began in the room had continued to this spot, where the stabbing had taken place, and the body been flung or fallen down-stairs.

No evidence of blood or of cleaning was visible anywhere else, so that this theory seemed well founded.

On entering the bedroom, indications of a struggle were apparent. A chair lay on one side of the room, with a dent in the wall where it had struck. A table was overturned near the window, and the lamp on it broken. Where it had fallen the floor was slightly scorched by the burning wick. There were no carpets in the house.

The bedclothing was tossed into a heap, and the sheets torn, as if the murdered man had been dragged bodily from his bed, while strongly resisting.

"There has been more than one man at work here," said one of the searching party. "Huntly was too strong a man to be handled by any single pair of arms in this town, and dragged out of bed without taking all the covers and sheets with him."

"Maybe he got a tap in advance," suggested another. "That bloody spot on his head may have been got here, instead of by tumbling down-stairs."

The suggestion was worth considering. But a careful search revealed no blood-marks on the pillows or sheets, such as would likely have come from such a wound.

"I have my opinion about the whole affair," remarked Colonel Levi, in an oracular tone.

"What is that?" asked some of the others, curiously.

"It is that they've been trying to make a false scent here, as well as outside. Look at the lay of them bed-covers. Do you think they would have tumbled that way if a live man had been dragged out of bed? Wouldn't they have been hauled half across the floor or clear out the door?"

"Do you think he was stunned in bed, and then pulled out?"

"Not a bit of it. It's my opinion that he took the alarm and jumped out himself, and was attacked by the murderer or murderers at the door or in the entry."

"But how do you explain the table and chair, and that ripped curtain at the window?"

"All done afterward to throw us off the track. When things are one way it pays to make them look another way. It's the true facts that hang murderers, and so they've rigged us up a lie."

"But what was it done for? For Huntly's money? There don't seem much signs of a search."

"Maybe they found the money easy, and made tracks."

"Or maybe they got skeered and slid."

These various conjectures were followed, at the suggestion of Colonel Levi, by a renewed investigation, with the design of settling these mooted questions, if possible.

While this search was taking place up-stairs, two of the prominent citizens of the town were seated on a bench before the house, engaged in conversation.

"Matters of this kind are always settled in one way," said one of them. "First there's a tremendous spurge, they arrest everybody they can lay hands on, generally without knowing what for. Then they let them all go, and begin to investigate in earnest. And by the time that is done the real murderer has covered up his tracks completely."

"But Lord bless you, Sam, what do you want us to do?" cried the other, pettishly. "We're not professional detectives. And it seems to me we looked into matters pretty close."

"Maybe so. But if I lost a diamond I wouldn't hunt for it that way. I wouldn't begin by going down to the river-bank, snatching up a handful of pebbles at random and hunting for my diamond among them."

"That's all very pretty, but those men weren't snatched at random. They were all suspicious characters, tramps, roughs, and that sort. Now I brought in one of them myself—Jake Bruce. And I don't think it was a blind snatch, either."

"It didn't take him long to clear himself."

"Yet look here, Sam. We can't hang a man for being a worthless dog and a drunkard, I suppose, but there's more against Bruce. What does he do for a living, to begin with?"

"Nothing, that I ever heard of."

"Yet his family don't starve. He pays his way, and has enough left to get drunk on. Where does his cash come from?"

"That's too big a conundrum for me."

"It's very considerable of a notion with me that he knows more about these horse-thieves than it would be healthy for him to tell."

"You're not the first to think that, Harry. But he's been watched close, and he's always found in town when the horses slide out."

"But his boy ain't. I'm told that the boy has made several mysterious disappearances, for days at a time."

"What! Tom Bruce? Come—come, don't say anything against him. All I've got to say is that it is a burning shame that such a fine lad is tied to such a brute of a father. Tom Bruce is sterling silver all through."

"You think so," rejoined the other. "But there's an old saying that still waters run deep. Let that go, though, that's not the question. I happen to know that there was bad blood between Jake Bruce and Mr. Huntly."

"Ah! That is more to the point."

"It is less than a month ago since I heard them in a hot dispute. They dropped it when I came near, but I had quick ears enough to hear some dark threats from Bruce. He swore that if Huntly did something that I could not catch, he would make Arkansas too hot to hold him."

"That's no more than anybody might say in a fit of spleen."

"There was more than that. I questioned Huntly about it afterward, but he was very close-mouthed. I could see that it was more than an every-day quarrel, and that there was some mystery back of it all."

"You said nothing of this when Bruce was questioned."

"What was the use? He proved a clean *alibi*. I saw no need of raking up old muck."

At this moment their talk was interrupted by the party of searchers, who came somewhat excitedly out of the house. Two boys, who sat behind the corner of the building, near enough to hear this conversation, rose and walked away. One of them had the graceful proportions of Tom Bruce.

At the head of the party who had come so excitedly from the house, was Colonel Levi Brown. His face was fuller of importance than ever,

and in his hand he clutched a canvas bag, that seemed to be very heavy.

"I told you so!" he said loudly. "This is no common murder for plunder. There's something deeper behind it. The mystery has got to be unfolded."

"What is the matter? What have you discovered?" cried the two men in the yard, leaping to their feet.

"This!" said Levi, lifting the bag in his hand. "We have found Mr. Huntly's money-bag, and without any trouble, either. The murderer could have had it with a very trifling search, if that was his object; which I don't believe it was."

"If he got scared and run, that would explain all that."

"But there's no sign that he got scared. The old woman never waked up, spite of all the chair and table flinging. And nobody in the town seems to have been near the place. What was there to scare them?"

"I can't say. It don't take much to scare a murderer. The flutter of a bat's wing sometimes does it."

"That's very true. But for all that, I don't believe it was plunder that Huntly was murdered for. It looks more like revenge. Now, who wanted revenge on him? That's the next thing to find out."

The conversation continued as the party walked slowly away, Colonel Levi carrying the money-sack to deposit with the authorities of the town.

CHAPTER III.

NEW LIGHT ON A DARK BUSINESS.

TOM BRUCE, the boy, or rather the young man, whom we have briefly introduced to the reader, was no ordinary character. The scene in his home life which we have given may serve to yield some evidence concerning him, but a fuller statement is necessary.

The son of a man like Jake Bruce had no easy life to lead. Jake was kind to the boy when sober, and Tom had a son's affection for him. But when drunk he was often brutally severe, both to his wife and his son, and as drunkenness was of very common occurrence in his life they did not lead any rose-hued existence.

Of the life of the family before coming to Mayville nothing was known in the town. They had been living there two or three years, but a mystery covered their precious life, unbroken by a word from any of the family.

The boy had somehow obtained an education, and at home was a constant student, his devotion to his books being a steady cause of ill-humor to his rum-bibbing parent.

Yet out of doors Tom Bruce revealed a different character. In all of the sports of the village he was one of the first and most active. No one could outrun him, outjump him, could fling him in a hand-to-hand wrestle, or was more skillful in any of their boyish games.

On horseback Tom was a very Centaur. He and the horse seemed one, and his equal in breaking and subduing any vicious brute of a horse could not be found among the men of the country.

Yet there was about him a proud independence and an air of hauteur ill-suited to his station in life, and which made him many enemies among the free-going people of the place, who vowed that Tom Bruce was "too big for his boots," and needed "setting down a peg."

Yet his sterling sense of honor and self-respect brought him as many friends among the more respectable citizens, who saw in him the making of a man of no ordinary caste, and who could not conceal their astonishment that such a son could come from such a father.

That certain mysteries surrounded the previous life of the family we have said. These mysteries had not disappeared during their residence in Mayville, as we have shown in the conversation of the two men before the Huntly mansion.

As was stated in the last chapter, two boys had risen and walked away at the end of this conversation. One of these was Tom Bruce, in whose intelligent face was a thoughtful look, as he moved toward the rear of the mansion.

The other was a youth of about his own age, a stout-built, well-knit fellow, Will Corson by name, Tom's closest friend among the growing population of Mayville.

They walked on without a word until they reached a rail fence in the rear of the stable, upon which they seated themselves in silence.

"You heard what them two men said?" remarked Will at length, looking around curiously at Tom.

"Yes. I am not quite deaf," was the short

reply. "They might find something better to talk about."

"Yet it's very common talk among folks," rejoined Will. "I've often heard people wonder where your father got his money, that he seems to have so much of it without ever doing a stroke of work."

"I don't see that it is any of their business," rejoined Tom.

"It might be," said Will, a little ruffled by his answer. "Some of them don't hesitate to hint that he is mixed up some way with the horse-thieves, and lives on his share of their profits. I don't believe this, Tom, mind, but you ought to know it's the talk."

"Talk never hung anybody," answered Tom. "When they bring proof then it will be time to squirm."

"See here, Tom, we're old friends, you know. I'm not the fellow to blab anything. But I am awfully curious to know something about the mysterious disappearances that Mr. Wilson and Mr. Smith talked about. Every once in a while you are gone for some days or a week, and when you come back your father gets suddenly flush. That's what people say, and what I've seen. It's mighty queer, Tom, and you might let an old friend into the secret. You needn't be afraid that I'll blab."

Tom shook his head.

"They're making a mountain out of a mole-hill," he said. "But I can't peach on dad's business. I don't know much more about it than you do, and what I do know I can't tell. If we're to be good friends, Will, you won't ask me to sell other peoples' secrets."

A short silence followed these words, Tom looking straight before him, with a fixed and resolute expression. There was a shade of ill-humor on Will's face. His brows contracted as if he was by no means pleased at Tom's reticence.

"You're mighty close-mouthed, Tom," he said, at length, with some spleen. "Maybe you think you're the only fellow that has secrets. If I was to tell all I know you might not find things so comfortable. I could say something, if I wanted to, about the Huntly murder."

Tom started, and looked around at him hastily. Then a grim look came upon his face, and he sharply answered:

"You are welcome to say what you please, Will Corson. I don't see that it makes any difference to me."

"Not if I saw your father the night of the murder, when he says he was drunk and asleep at Tony Blink's?"

Tom turned pale, and caught at the rail to steady himself.

"You saw him? When? How?" he hastily asked.

"Out of my window, about three or four o'clock in the morning. I felt a little sick, and had got up and was sitting at the window, when two men came skulking past. One of them—"

"What kind of a night was it?" interrupted Tom.

"Dark."

"I should think so. Pitch dark."

"How do you know?"

"I was out at that time. That's all."

"You were out at that hour?"

"Yes. Hunting our cow, that had strayed away. I guess it was me and my dog you saw."

"Not much, Tom. It was pretty dark, that's certain, and I couldn't be sure—but—"

"But you'd like to hang somebody, on the strength of a shadow which you saw through pitch darkness," cried Tom, breaking out in open anger. "Go ahead, my lad, if you want to; it's your innings. You're welcome to say what you please. But you and I can't be friends, when there's a thing like this between us. I don't like this sort of making men out of shadows."

Tom leaped from the fence and walked angrily away. Will remained there, a little out of sorts at what had happened. He was on the point of springing down and going after his irate friend, when a hand was laid on his shoulder from behind.

"Stay where you are, Will; don't be in a hurry. I want to have a word with you."

Will looked hastily around, and saw behind him the face of his father, who had been one of the party of searchers.

"I wish you wasn't quite so thick with that fellow," he said. "He's well behaved enough himself, but he comes of bad stock, and is not fit company for you. I heard part of your talk, Will, and I don't like to find my son keeping back evidence about such a horrible affair as this murder."

"You heard me!" cried Will, jumping down with a very red face. "You stood there, listening!"

"When you have such secrets to talk about, you had better not talk so loud, Will. I could hear you from ten yards away, and I stopped to get the end of that interesting conversation. Now, if you want to cover up a murder, I am not the man to let you. I want you to tell the folks round here all you know about it."

"I won't," declared Will, sullenly.

"You will, then; or, by the Lord, I will know why! No son of mine shall take such a stand as that."

Will stood silent and irresolute, gnawing his lip, while a multitude of emotions passed across his features. After a moment a new resolution came into his face, and he firmly said:

"You are right, father. Duty to friendship is one thing; duty to the community is a greater thing; I am ready to tell all I know, but it's not much. The fact is, Tom made me angry, and I spoke too positive."

"All I want you to tell is just what you know. No more, and no less. Come."

He led the way, Will following, to where a group of the searching-party still stood, the others having gone.

Reaching them, at his father's suggestion Will repeated his story, though with much less positiveness than when he had told it to Tom. He spoke to a highly interested audience.

"My room is in the back of the house," he said, "and looks over the garden and the fields back of it. The two men were coming along the side fence of the garden, toward the street, skulking along so they were half hid by the fence."

"How far off were they at the nearest point to you?"

"About ten or fifteen yards, I reckon."

"And the night was dark?"

"Not pitch dark. The clouds had just broke a little, and there were some stars. Yet at that distance they didn't seem much more than shadows."

"And one of them, you say looked like Jake Bruce?"

"I wouldn't like to say that. It isn't easy to make a man out of a shadow. He seemed to me about the size and shape of Jake Bruce, but I suppose there's twenty men in Mayville near that size."

"The other one; what was he like?"

"Rather slim, I took it. And a bit inclined to be tall."

"Why did you not speak of this before, Will?" asked one of the party.

"Because it only struck me to-day that they might have something to do with it. I thought that they had been out somewhere on a night hunt, and were coming home late."

"And you did not connect them with the murder till to-day?"

"Only while I was talking with Tom Bruce on the fence there. Then it came on me like a flash. But I made too much about one of the men looking like his father. I thought so then, but coming to think it over I wouldn't like to say so. It is all too much like a puff of smoke in my memory."

Further questions were asked, but the more Will thought of it the more uncertain he became. That first impression, which is often the correct one, but which loses its force with continued reflection, had settled strangely on Jake Bruce as the man, but talking it over he grew very doubtful.

"The second one seemed slim and rather tall," remarked Mr. Corson, reflectively. "See, here, gentlemen, that does not answer badly for Tony Blink, the man who proved the *alibi* for Jake Bruce. That *alibi* would not be worth much if the two of them were concerned together in the affair."

"They are very close associates," said one of the group.

"And Blink has a shady reputation," suggested another.

"This matter is worth looking deeper into," replied a third. "It may be that we are on the edge of a discovery. Will's testimony is valuable, very valuable."

After some further conversation the party broke up, to spread the new evidence they had gained through the town.

CHAPTER IV.

JAKE BRUCE LAYING OUT WORK.

DURING the few days that succeeded those of the events just recorded, it was remarked at Mayville that Jake Bruce kept unusually sober. When twitted for this by some of his companions, he remarked:

"How the blazes d'ye expect a man to get hilarious without money? I kin swaller as much sure death as any man in these diggin's, but I allers pays my shot; nobody kin say as I ever axed for whisky on tick. Consequently, I never drinks on an empty pocket."

"Running dry, are you, Jake? Got to the bottom of that pile of yours? Reckon you'll have to gup up your holiday and get to work, old coon."

"If I'd scragged old Huntly, as folks are saying, I wouldn't be wantin' whisky-money, you bet! I'd never have left that bag o' dollars fur Kurnel Brown to finger."

"I believe you there, Jake," laughed his friend. "But do you know what folks are saying?"

"Some rot, I s'pose."

"They are hinting that you were seen that night not far from Huntly's house, somewhere about four o'clock. If that's so, it look bad for your *alibi*, Jake. As an old friend I tell you this, 'cause you ought to know. I won't presume to give no advice, but if I was you I'd have business somewhere in the East before another sun-up."

Jake's embrowned face grew sallow on hearing these words. He staggered a step backward, and laid his hand on the fence behind him for support.

By the time the speaker finished, however, he had regained his composure. His face regained its hardihood, and he thrust his hands in his pockets with a defiant air.

"S'pose you would if you was me," he rejoined. "But you ain't me, nary time. If I was the man as put that howie blade into Huntly, I'd 'a' slid like greased lightnin'; but as I had no more to do with it nor a baby, I reckon I'll stand my ground. I ain't the sort that keers fur old woman chatter."

"Good fur you, Jake. Let's likker!"

"Nary time. I've swore off."

"The thunder you have!"

"Ain't goin' ter swaller a blazin' drop till I git some spondulicks ag'in. And I ain't goin' to work fur them, either. All I've got to do is to draw a check on my bank and the spons come. Jake Bruce ain't no slouch; now you mind that."

With a knowing laugh Jake walked away. But his laugh subsided, and his face grew dark as midnight before he had taken many steps. His features worked as with inward rage, and muttered curses came from his lips.

"May the devil fly away with the infernal cub! So he's playin' that on me, is he? Somethin's got to be done, Jake Bruce, and mighty spy, or there'll be the very Old Nick to pay."

His feet took him ere long to Tony Blink's, which gentleman he found behind the bar in his beer saloon—just then empty.

A wink from Jake as he passed onward to an inner room, soon brought that worthy into his company. There was a look of disquiet on Tony's face.

"Have you heard the talk that's going the rounds?" he asked nervously.

"About my being seen out that night?"

"And me, too; they say both of us were seen."

The two men looked at one another with alarmed expression.

"You?" muttered Jake. "He didn't say as he saw more'n one."

"Who didn't?"

"Tom Bruce, burn his blabbin' hide! It's him as all this comes from. And it's all through them rascally books. See here, Tony, things is a bit squally. There's a nigger in the wood-pile, but if I don't take off the hide of that nigger, then sell me for a jack-rabbit. S'pose we jist have a little confab over ways and means."

A conversation ensued that stretched out for an hour in length. It was conducted in low tones, and behind locked doors. Evidently the two men had secrets which they did not care to have the world know.

At the end of the hour Jake made his way out by the rear door, taking special care to avoid observation. He evidently did not want his conferences with Tony Blink to be known to the public.

We must precede Jake Bruce to his residence, into which Tom had just entered, with flushed face and bounding nerves, after a morning of active exercise out-of-doors.

Mrs. Bruce looked at him with marks of anxiety on her faded countenance.

"Had a long round this morning, mother," cried the youth, flinging his cap into a corner.

"Made a good ten miles, and feel fresh as a daisy. Where's dad?"

"Where he generally is, I judge," answered

Mrs. Bruce, bringing the pan she held in her hand spitefully down on the table. "No need to tell you where that is."

"But he's been sober these three days; and he told me he'd swore off."

"Yes; and the Mississippi swears off from running once in a while, when it gets froze up. But it don't last. See here, Tom."

She moved nearer to him, looking toward the door with a show of apprehension.

"What is it, mother?" asked Tom, anxiously.

"Isn't there some talk about your father in the town? Something connected with that Huntly murder?"

"I haven't heard any."

"Well, I want you to look out, Tom, that's all. Beware of your father. He's a dark man when he's aroused. There is something wrong with him. Ever since you told him about seeing him in the street that night he has not been quite himself."

Tom looked at her a moment in silence, and then burst into a laugh.

"I reckon not," he said. "He's been sober ever since, and that's not himself."

"It's not that. I've heard dark mutterings and threats. And I've seen him look at you in a way I didn't like."

"It's always that way when a man breaks off sudden from whisky," persisted Tom. "It's dreadful upsetting to the nerves. But dad's all right. It's only the whisky that makes a devil of him. There ain't no better man in this town if he's sober. He never said a cross word to me yet, except when rum did it."

Mrs. Bruce shook her head doubtfully. She was evidently not convinced, but for reasons of her own she did not think it wise to say too much.

"Listen to me, my boy," she said, with a look of maternal tenderness. "I know your father better than you do. My advice to you is to beware. I dare not say more."

Tom looked at her with a questioning expression. He laid his hand affectionately on her shoulder, and pushed her down into a chair, seating himself before her.

"Mother," he said soberly, "there is a mystery surrounding our life that I would give much to have cleared up. Even the people of the town talk of it, and have asked me about my mysterious journeys. I could not tell them if I would. I know little more than they do. Where does dad get those horses he gives me to ride? Who is the man I get the money from? What is behind it all?"

"Don't ask me, my son," answered Mrs. Bruce, with a distressed face. "I know little more than you about it, and what I know I dare not tell."

"I am old enough to know," answered Tom, discontentedly. "Who am I? Who are you? Who is dad? Where did we come from? Why do we live here? What do we live on?"

"Not another word!" cried Mrs. Bruce, closing the boy's lips with her hands, while a look of dread came upon her face. "Do you want Jake to kill me? He would do it if he knew that I revealed his secrets. Oh, he is a terrible man when he is roused—a dark and terrible man! That is why I bid you beware of him. It was an error to tell him that you saw him that night."

"It would be if I was a coward and a sneak, mother, while I am not," answered Tom, bravely. "I like my dad, and I have a son's feeling for him, but I'm old enough to know what I'm doing. I won't ask you to tell me anything, mother, but he's got to tell me. I am not going to act again in the dark."

"Don't ask him, Tom! don't ask him—for my sake!" pleaded the poor woman, wringing her hands. "You don't know—you must not know. He will never tell you, but he may do you an injury if you press him too hard."

"No, he won't," said Tom, positively. "I won't ask him when he's drunk, for he's not himself then; but I don't believe my father's a bad man when he's sober. I haven't said half I know, mother. There was something queer between dad and Mr. Huntly. I've heard some things. I don't believe he murdered him. I don't believe he could do it. But there was something queer between them."

Mrs. Bruce grew deadly pale during these words. She held out both hands as if to repel some shape of horror, and sunk back limply in her chair. Tom watched her with questioning eyes.

Suddenly she sprung up, caught the pan she had let fall, and ran to the stove, where she became earnestly busy in culinary labors.

"Quick! get your book, Tom," she said, in a loud whisper. "There comes your father. I

would not have him know what we have been talking about for the world."

Tom, however, gave no signs of obeying this frightened appeal. He remained in his chair, with a defiant look on his handsome face, his fingers clunched like those of one who is ready to combat any obstacle.

The moment afterward the door opened, and his father entered.

"What are you up to, Tom?" he asked, in a tone of unusual good-nature. "Where's your book? 'Tain't often as you ain't got yer head buried in some printed stuff."

"Learning may not always do good, but it never does harm," said Tom, a little sullenly.

"Larnin' be fizzled! I never'd much 'pinion on it. A feller better be choppin' wood than choppin' logic. 'Tain't nat'el fur a solid-built feller like you to be squattin' in a corner with a book, like a rag-baby, when ther's all out-doors to bustle 'bout in."

"I think I bustle about considerable; don't I, dad? Ther ain't many spryer boys than me in Mayville."

"That's so, Tom," striking him with pride on the shoulders. "Ye're a chip o' the old block that way, I'll guv' in. And now we're talkin' 'bout that, youngster, I've got a job staked out fur you. Want yer to take a moonlight ride, and fotch me some spondulicks. You know the ropes, Tom. You've been there before."

The boy looked up in his father's face with an air of firm resolution.

"That's just what I don't know, dad," he remarked. "I don't know the ropes, but it's time I did. I've been working in the dark about long enough, and I think I'm old enough now to go with my eyes open."

A look of sudden fear and rage shot into Jake's dark face, which was quickly repressed. Mrs. Bruce, who was working with her pan at the stove, let it fall from her hands, with a loud clatter of iron on iron. Her husband turned on her furiously.

"What the thunder's the matter with your fingers, old woman? Are they turned into drumsticks, that ye're makin' all that clatter?"

She made no answer, but bent with renewed diligence over her labor. But Tom took up the current of the conversation.

"It's just as I say, dad," he remarked. "People around Mayville are talking, and it's time for me to say something. They want to know what takes me away, and how you get flush when I come back. They are saying that you are mixed up with the horse-thieves, and that this money is part of the plunder."

"They're sayin' that, are they?" queried Jake resting his hand on a chair-back. "And you believe it, I s'pose?"

"No, I don't. I know it isn't true. But I want to know what is true. Who is this man that takes me in a boat across the Mississippi, and who is the gentleman that meets me in the grove and gives me the money-package? Is this an honest transaction? If so, I am old enough to know something about my father's business."

"Well, look yere, Susan; the feller's beginnin' to grow a mustache; and he's cuttin' his wisdom-teeth. Wants to know more nor his old dad, he does. Ain't 'nough l'arnin' in the books fur him, but I've got ter pervide him with some extry."

"That's so," said Tom, putting his finger in his mouth. "I can feel the wisdom teeth coming."

"Then s'pose you jist choke 'em back a bit, fer I ain't goin' to tell you a scrimp."

"Then I won't take that ride."

"Flat rebellion, is it? Lucky fur you I ain't drunk, Tom Bruce. I don't reckernise no two bosses in this house."

"I'm near old enough to be my own boss outside the house," answered Tom, resolutely.

"Whatever else I am, I'm honest, and I'm not going to be mixed up in any shady business."

"See here, Tom; none of that if you and me's to be friends. That money's the rent of my cotton plantations in Tennessee, and ther's no mystery about it."

"That won't do, dad," rejoined Tom, shaking his head. "That's altogether too thin."

"So the boy's wiser than his dad, is he?" cried Jake, bursting into a roar of laughter.

"Very well, youngster, I'll say this much: I've got good reasons fer not telling you what you want to know now. But when you come back from this trip I'll let the cat out of the bag. Will that satisfy you?"

"I judge it will have to."

"I reckon so myself," answered Jake, turning his head to hide a peculiar look that came upon it, a treacherous expression which did not escape the eyes of his wife.

"When am I to start, dad?"

"At ten o'clock to-night. You'll find the horse in the old place. You'd best go to bunk and git two or three hours' snooze this arternoon, so's to fresh up fur the night."

"There's one thing I would like to know, at any rate. There's something odd about those horses."

"They're square horses, Tom, you bet on that. Don't ax too many questionous now, so's we won't fight. I ain't nary an angel when I git r'iled."

"That's so, dad," responded Tom, settling back into silence.

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS JOURNEY.

THE night was dark and rather chilly, as Tom Bruce walked briskly along a road a few miles distant from Mayville. The darkness, however, seemed not to trouble him. He had good eyes, and appeared familiar with every step of the way.

It was about ten o'clock when he reached a little clump of oaks, which skirted one side of the road, throwing a deep shadow over the roadway. The place was solitary. For a mile back he had not passed a single house.

Tom turned into this bit of woodland with a curious sensation.

"I wonder if I'll find it there?" he asked himself. "It's an odd business all through. It's too deep for me. But I reckon it must be on the square."

His thoughts were interrupted by the loud neighing of a horse close at hand. Tom heard it with a feeling of satisfaction.

"The beast's there, anyhow, wherever he comes from," he ejaculated. "But it's mighty queer, hunting in the middle of a thick wood at ten o'clock at night for a horse, and always finding him. And then fetchin' him back and leaving him here. It's 'most as odd as a fairy story. Dad's got to let me into this secret, or I'll shut down on going again."

The horse continued to neigh, as if excited on hearing a human voice. In a few moments Tom reached him. Through the darkness he dimly saw a large-framed dusky-hued steed, tied by a long halter to a sapling. It was saddled and bridled, and had every preparation for a journey.

With the joyous impulse of a thorough horseman the boy loosened the halter, and led the whinnying animal out into the road.

The bridle had been thrown over his neck, the bit hanging loose. Tom adjusted it, sprung lightly to the saddle, and took the reins in hand. "Now, my bonny lad," he cried cheerily, "let out. We have a long journey before us, and you will need to show your paces."

Another loud neigh came from the horse, as if he had understood these words. With a bound that would have unhorsed a less skilful rider, he took the road, and darted forward with a speed that spoke well for Jake Bruce's judgment in horseflesh.

"Go it, old fellow!" cried Tom jovially, with the glee of a born equestrian.

"It's life to back a steed like this. Where in the world does dad get them! A different horse near every time, but all good goers. The business is a shady one, but it's worth some risk to ride an animal that's got so much go in him."

Through the night he rode on, hour after hour, at the same rattling pace. The horse seemed to have as much bottom as speed, and for hours kept up his rapid movement.

Through the shadows of the night they fled, like two deeper shadows. Only the thud of the iron hoofs on the hard earth road told the few who saw them that they were other than a phantom horse and rider.

Now they flew past some wayside house, its inmates buried in slumber; now through some village they dashed, the ring of the horse's hoofs on the stones of the street rousing many of the good people. Yet ere curious eyes could reach the windows the horse and its rider vanished like shadows in the distance.

Now they breasted a steep bill; now shot down a long declivity, with a running stream at bottom. Now for a mile the road wound through a thick forest, that doubled the gloom of the night. Yet Tom trusted to the instinct of his horse, who kept the road as if it was broad day.

On, on! for mile after mile—for hour after hour.

The bold rider was stirred to a high pitch of exultation by the excitement and mystery of his night ride. Shouts and wild halloes came from his lips, which seemed to inspire the horse to renewed action.

Once his heated nerves found vent in a wild yell in the center of a quiet village, stirring the inhabitants suddenly from their sleep. Some of them flew to the windows, with an undefined idea that a regiment of light horsemen had attacked the town.

But all they saw was a solitary horse and rider vanishing like ghosts in the distance, while a wild laugh, that seemed unearthly to their sleepy ears, came ringing back through the night air.

It was as if the ghostly huntsman of the German legend had dashed with his "Ti-ra-la!" through their town.

Finally the faint red light of the coming dawn shone dimly in the eastern sky, toward which the young horseman was journeying.

The black steed was now moving much more soberly. The fire had long since been taken out of him, while the wild exultation of his rider was tamed down into a decorous mood better suiting the coming daylight.

The bandit-like feeling of the night ride was gone, horse and rider were growing weary, and rest and a breakfast would soon be imperative.

Slowly the eastern light deepened and broadened, until the sky was all aglow with the twilight.

Slowly the country awakened from its slumbers, curtains were drawn aside, windows opened to admit the morning air, and here and there a person stood yawning on his porch, wondering at the early traveler who rode briskly past.

An hour more, and laborers made their appearance in the fields, workmen traversed the streets of the villages, and the sun showed his red face full in the east, though half-hidden behind a mantle of fleecy clouds.

Shortly afterward Tom rode into a somewhat larger town than those he had traversed in the night.

Halting at the door of the inn he sprang from his wet and weary horse, whose head drooped from over-fatigue.

"Give him a good rub down and a rest, and be careful how you feed and water him," he said to the hostler. "He has had a severe burst and wants skillful handling."

"All right. I know the p'ints of a boss; and 'tain't the first of yours I've had in hand," answered the hostler. "You're a deuce of a hard rider for so young a colt."

"When I go to sleep it will be in my bed, not on a horse," rejoined Tom, with a laugh, as he entered the inn.

Here he was welcomed by the landlord, who seemed to recognize him.

"I'm hungry enough to eat iron nails, landlord," declared Tom. "I've been riding like sin, and the air's full of appetite. When will breakfast be ready?"

"I can give you a bite now. But if you can wait a half-hour our regular breakfast will be set."

"Very well. I reckon man, as well as beast, ought to rest before eating. I'll wait. But if you forget to call me at breakfast time there'll be a sudden death in your family."

"I'll take the risk," said the landlord, laughing at the odd humor of his guest.

Tom's night rides were giving him a manly manner and experience of the world out of consonance with his boyishness at Mayville.

Two hours afterward he was again upon the road, rested and refreshed. His horse also had regained its spirit, and seemed a different animal from the drooping steed he had ridden into the town.

The morning light showed it to be a jet-black horse, large-bodied and long of limb, with evidence of great muscular power.

"That's a fine animal. You never rode him here before," said the landlord.

"No, I'm death on trading horses," answered Tom, easily. "Never keep one long. Good-by. I'll see you again soon."

The black was out with his long, swinging stride, moving as freely as though he had not made a forty or fifty-miles journey.

About four o'clock that afternoon, Tom drew rein before a small frame cottage, on the banks of what seemed a mighty stream of water. It was the Mississippi.

He now rode an iron-gray horse, having left the black somewhere behind him on the road.

The door of the house opened as he halted, and a man in the garb of a waterman appeared. He nodded familiarly to Tom, with the air of an acquaintance.

"Got anything for me?"

"This," answered Tom, handing him a sealed note, as he sprang from his horse.

The waterman opened and glanced his eye over it.

"Are you tired?" he asked, looking up.

"Yes, and hungry."

"You will find some lunch on the table inside. I will take care of your horse while you're eating."

But Tom Bruce's adventures were by no means over for that day. Late as it was, and severe as his journey had been, it was not yet at an end.

Five o'clock found him on the river, seated in the stern of a boat, which the waterman was impelling over the river with a long and sturdy stroke.

The current was strong and needed vigorous arms to stem it, but the skilled rower made rapid headway over the rushing waters.

Not a word passed between the two men. The boatman was grimly taciturn, and Tom was tired enough to have nothing to say.

At length, after a struggle with the rapid stream, the prow of the boat touched ground at the Tennessee side, and the boatman sprang ashore.

"Land," he said, briefly.

Tom lost no time in obeying.

Fastening his boat, the waterman led the way up the river-bank, and through a skirting line of low timber, to a small and rather dilapidated building which stood not far back from the stream.

This was occupied by a family of poor whites, who received the travelers as if this were not their first visit.

"Get supper for this gentleman, and make up your best bed for him," said the boatman in a tone of authority.

He then led Tom outside, out of hearing of the people, and remarked:

"At five o'clock in the morning, you understand. In the old place."

"All right," answered Tom, briefly. "I will be there."

The boatman walked away toward a high-road that ran by at no great distance from the house. Tom followed him with his eyes until he had disappeared. Once he seemed inclined to pursue him, but checked himself.

"No, no," he said, "I have given my word. Yet I'd sell my arm to see through this business. There's an overdose of mystery about it, and I'm getting more than I bargained for. Somebody's got to open out soon, or I'll kick."

Yet the plain but palatable supper that was prepared for him helped to put him in better humor, and the hard bed on which he spent the night proved soft as down to his wearied limbs. He slept like an oak tree, and would not have awakened before eight the next morning if his host had not called him.

"You said you wanted ter be up afore five," was his apology.

"That's the ticket. Much obliged," answered Tom. "I'm going out for a little stroll in the fresh air. I'll be back to breakfast."

Quickly dressing, he stepped out into the open air.

It was yet dark. The swash of the river came to his ears, and through the trees he could catch glimpses of its dark current.

After a minute's observation, Tom turned down the course of the river, and followed it until he was some two miles below the place where he had passed the night.

Here was a clump of trees, through which he passed. Beyond them was an open space, nearly surrounded by shrubbery.

It was yet quite dark, and he could but make out the forms of two men, who stood in the center of the clearing.

One of these was the boatman. The other was a tall, portly, well-dressed personage, whose face was not clearly discernible in the nightly shadows, and was moreover partly concealed by the slouched rim of his soft felt hat.

He advanced toward Tom, looked him keenly in the face, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You are growing," he said. "You are almost a man."

"I begin to feel like one," answered Tom.

"How does your father treat you?"

"All right when he's sober. But he's a little rough when he's drunk."

"Ah! That's the old story. Is there anything new at Mayville?"

"Only the murder of Mr. Huntly."

If he had been struck in the face the questioner could not have staggered back more suddenly; his swarthy face grew pale.

"Mr. Huntly? John Huntly? Murdered?"

"Yes."

"By whom? What for?"

"That's the mystery. Not for robbery, they

say, as nothing was taken. But who did it, or why, no one knows."

The questioner seated himself on a stump behind him, rested his face on his hand, and was silent for some minutes.

After an interval he rose, with a dark look on his face, and advanced to Tom, holding out to him a small package, wrapped in thick paper.

"Here is the packet," he said. "Be sure it falls only into Jake Bruce's--your father's, hands. Do you comprehend?"

"That much, at least. But there is a good deal more I'd like to comprehend."

The gentleman looked at him curiously.

"Wait," he said. "The time will come."

He turned and walked away. A few steps buried him in the shrubbery. The sharp eyes of the boy had not been able to half make out his bearded and partly concealed face.

CHAPTER VI.

JAKE BRUCE IN FUNDS.

At an early hour in the morning of the day succeeding that of the meeting by the river, Tom Bruce rode into the camp of timber from which he had originally taken his horse, and tied him to the same tree.

It was yet an hour from sunrise, and beneath the shades of the trees the darkness was extreme. Outside, however, it was much lighter. The sky was clear, and spangled with myriad stars, from which some light came down to the earth.

On leaving the woods, through which he had made his way with great difficulty, for the open air, Tom experienced a sensation of relief. He had no prevision of the fate in store for him.

Yet at that instant he beheld with surprise a dark figure suddenly appear beside him, too undefined in the darkness for his form to be made out.

Tom sprang back in alarm, crying out:

"Who goes there?"

The answer was a frightful one. It seemed to him at the moment as if one of the great trees of the forest had been suddenly uprooted, and fallen with a crushing weight upon his head.

Whatever it was, it hurled him to the earth as if he had been struck by lightning.

He lay there like one dead, stretched out beneath the silent stars, while dark figures bent above him, and searched with rapid fingers his dress.

The next moment, footsteps sounded on the dry leaves of the forest, and a cry was heard, as if in answer to his exclamation.

The figures rose and silently vanished under the trees of the forest.

A minute after, the horse was heard to neigh loudly. Then the crackling sound of hoofs on the dry leaves was heard. Silence followed.

The young traveler lay stretched in the stillness and rigidity of death. No one came near him. The cry that had been raised was not repeated. The footsteps died away in the distance. All was still.

Had murder been committed under that screen of darkness? Was the young life, a moment before so vital in that strong frame, crushed out? Whose hand had done the deed, and with what purpose?

These were questions which only the future could answer. Mystery yet lay like a pall over that unprovoked crime.

That day passed over in the town of Mayville, and the next day dawned. No word had come to men's ears of the deadly forest deed.

In the afternoon of the day in question, a considerable group of men was collected in the Bald Eagle Saloon, the principal drinking and gambling-place in the town.

Prominent in this crowd was Jake Bruce, now well-filled with whisky, and offering to treat the house with a freedom that betokened a sudden access of cash.

"It's my lay-out, boys!" he ejaculated with an oath. "I've made a divy, and I want every blue-eyed daisy here to likker on it. And the chap as don't take his grog like a man, ain't no friend of mine."

There did not seem to be anybody there who cared to quarrel with him or his whisky, to judge by the unanimity with which they ordered drinks.

"That's like men and brothers!" he shouted in the excitement of drunkenness. "I'm in fur fun, gentlemen, and I don't loer what it's like. Who wants a game o' poker, dollar ante? Or whar's the chap as is got the heart to match me fur five-dollar gold-pieces? Say the word. I'm the coon that's got the lucre. Come up fur your fodder, any feller as wants to be laid out."

There was no response to his challenge, though

more than one flourishing game was going on in the saloon.

"Hey, Tony," he cried, slapping his friend heartily on the back, "flunked 'em that time, didn't I? Thar ain't a chap here as is got the spunk to stand up afore old Jake when he's on ther rampage."

"Come with me," answered Tony, rather anxiously. "You are getting too full of whisky, Jake, and will be quarreling with somebody soon. Come, I want to have a private chat with you."

"You do, hey? And I'm gittin' drunk, am I? I dunno as it's your money, Tony Blink. D'ye want me to swipe yer jaws, blast yer pictur'?"

"Oh, come, Jake! You know I'm your friend."

"No, I won't; nary a step, if you clap a der-rick to me. Here's a chap that's got the dough, and ain't afeard to spend it. Ain't that so, kurnel? Trot up here. I'm goin' to match you fur fives or tens, jist as you've a mind."

Colonel Levi Brown, who was the person addressed, turned with dignified disdain from his rough questioner.

"I didn't come here to gamble," he said, briefly.

"You're afeard, that's what ails you," growled Jake. "Yer ain't got the sand ter stand up afore a white man. And ye'r so blazin' stuck up that you think you kin fling slurs wherever you've a mind."

"I'm not in the humor for play, I tell you," declared Levi, impatiently. "Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, come, Jake," pleaded Tony. "Don't you see the kurnel don't want to play?"

"The kurnel be fizzled!" roared Jake, who seemed full of the instinct of fight. "It's 'cause I don't wear a b'iled shirt and high hat that he's puttin' on airs. I want yer to know, old Levi Brown, that I'm yer equal, and I don't keer a picayune fur all yer big airs."

He caught the colonel by the arm as he spoke, and swung him roughly round.

"What ails you?" cried the colonel in a rage.

"Do you want to quarrel?"

"Most anything you want, kurnel. To match ten-dollar gold pieces, or to fight, or any other kind o' fun as you've a mind to name."

"I'll say this much," answered the colonel, jerking his arm loose, and furiously facing his opponent. "I don't gamble with a man that's suspected of murder, and that gets his money no one knows how; by horse-stealing, some people say. Nor do I fight with a low-lived drunken scoundrel, who is bringing up his son in his own evil ways, and educating him for the gallows."

Jake staggered back a step at the suddenness of this assault. Then, with a howl of rage, he dashed forward, and aimed a furious blow at the face of his antagonist.

The colonel was ready, however. He caught Jake's arm, and held it in a vise-like grip.

"I'm not done yet," he said. There, drop that knife, or, by Heaven, I'll put a bullet through you!"

Jake had been feeling for his bowie, but he withdrew his hand on seeing the muzzle of the colonel's pistol staring him in the face.

"You've drawn the right bower, kurnel," he muttered. "Let's cry quits."

"Not till I get through, Jake Bruce. I've got something for your ear first. You brought this man to prove that you were drunk and in bed the night of the murder. Take care we don't prove that the pair of you were abroad that night. You're not clear of that business yet, you whisky-swilling reprobate. Nor that isn't all. Where did you get the money you are boasting of now? Where has your son been this week past? How do you explain his mysterious journeys, and your sudden flushes of cash? You have some ugly business on foot, Jake Bruce, and look out that you don't swing for it yet."

The colonel had lost all his pompousness in his anger, and showed a force and energy unusual to his quiet moods.

At the direct charge made by him, Tony Blink had grown nervous and pale, and withdrew a step into the crowd.

Jake also looked for a moment as if he had been struck a hard blow in the face, but he quickly recovered his hardihood.

"All that's some o' my boy's blab, blast his nimble tongue," he roared. "He's been talkin' 'bout seein' me out that night. But he won't say it ag'in, roast his young hide!"

"Your son, eh?" exclaimed the colonel, eagerly. "So he saw you, too, did he? Thank you for the information, Jake. You'll hang yourself if we leave you alone. Our information didn't come from him, if it will be any satisfaction to you to know it."

"The blazes it didn't!" roared Jake, too drunk

for caution, though Tony had grown paler still, and nervously slipped into a chair, as if weak in the limbs. "I inought 'a' knowed it was a lie, and I was jist drawin' you on. As fur my boy, he's off on bizness fur me, and what's my bizness is nobody else's bizness. Jake Bruce never did a stroke in his life as he's afeard to let the daylight on."

"You don't know where your boy is, then?" demanded a voice from near the door.

"I s'pect he's perambulin' home'wards," rejoined Jake, looking round for the speaker. Despite his hardihood, there was a slight quaver in his voice.

"It is a question whether he's alive or dead at this minute," came the reply. "He was picked up yesterday morning in a piece of woodland about five miles out from town with his head badly cut open with a blow from a bludgeon."

This news made an excitement in the saloon. Jake tore his wrist from the colonel's grasp, and faced the man, with a show of great feeling.

"My boy?" he cried, hoarsely. "My boy Tom! Knocked in the head? By Christopher, gentlemen, them's ugly news fur a father! Dead! You ain't sayin' he's dead?"

The news seemed to have nearly sobered him.

"Not dead, but in danger," answered the man, coming forward.

It proved to be Samuel Wilson, the person who had shown himself so friendly to Tom in the conversation before the Huntly mansion.

"What is it? How was it done? Tell us all about it, Sam," cried several voices. "How could such a thing as this happen yesterday, and not be known here till to-day?"

"Because the senses were knocked out of the boy, and no one knew who he was, or where he came from."

"But he's not dead? Tell me he's not dead!" persisted Jake, with great evidence of feeling.

"I believe he's still living."

"This is a strange business," remarked the colonel. "How did it happen? Tell us what you know about it, Mr. Wilson."

"This is about the shape of the story. It comes from Joe Jones, a farmer whom some of you know. He was out with his gun yesterday morning, and started an hour before day, to bring in some game for breakfast. As he was passing a clump of oak woods on his way to the spot where he expected to do his shooting, he heard a loud cry of 'Who goes there?' It was followed by a crushing sound, as if somebody's skull had been broken in."

"Joe was badly startled—he is not too brave at the best—but he yelled out something. The next minute there was a scamper over the leaves, and then came the neigh of a horse, and the sound of hoofs. Then it all died away."

"Joe looked around for a little, but he could find nothing, and all was still as death. Finally he began to think that it was something uncanny. He got panicky, in fact, and made tracks away."

"He came back again though, after he had dropped a partridge. It was broad day now, and the first thing his eyes fell on was a human figure stretched on the grass, which was red with his blood."

"Joe was scared worse than ever. He could see it was a boy, and he seemed to be stone dead. His head was cut open with a long gash, that laid the bone bare. He had him picked up and taken to the farm-house, where he sent for the doctor, who pronounced that he was not dead, but was in serious danger."

"The boy did not come to till two hours ago, when he told them that his name was Tom Bruce, and that he lived in Mayville. That was all he was able to say, for he went off in a swoon again."

"Joe sent word here at once. The doctor says the boy is yet in serious danger, and may die any minute."

This announcement made a decided sensation in the saloon. Coming so soon as it did after the murder of Mr. Huntly the deadly assault roused the people to a high pitch of excitement and indignation. What did it mean? Were they all to be exposed to murder?

Yet it had one good effect so far as Jake Bruce was concerned. It removed from him the growing suspicion in regard to the Huntly murder. His own son had become a victim of the murderers.

Seemingly sobered by the announcement he sat in a semi-stupefied state, his face on his hands, and wearing a very woe-begone expression.

"Tom! My Tom!" he muttered. "Who's gone and killed him! My only boy!"

He rose at length, and staggered to the door

of the saloon, followed with looks of commiseration by the crowd, who were excitedly talking over the matter.

As Jake left the room he was followed by a personage who had stood by the door for the last ten minutes.

He said nothing till they had got some hundred paces from the saloon, when he advanced and laid his hand on Jake's shoulder.

"Jake Bruce," he said in an impressive voice, "what have you done with your ward?"

Jake looked hastily, round, and then flung up his hands with an aspect of dismay, while his face blanched to the color of marble.

"Good God, you here!" he cried, as he staggered back like one who has received a heavy blow.

CHAPTER VII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

THE news of the assault on Tom Bruce raised an excitement elsewhere in the town than in the Bald Eagle Saloon. Tom's manliness had made him many friends, to which his reputation, as a hard student added.

Particularly among the boys was he a favorite. Will Corson, whose quarrel with him we have described, was conscience-stricken on hearing of Tom's disaster, and made his way without a moment's loss of time to the farm-house where the wounded boy had been taken.

Much to his relief he found that the story about Tom's condition had been greatly exaggerated. Instead of being nearly dead, and stretched out in blank unconsciousness, he found the invalid seated in an easy-chair, his head bandaged, but otherwise looking much like his old self.

"Hello, Will!" he cried. "Glad to see you, old fellow! You heard how I got tumbled, eh?"

"I heard that you were near dead," rejoined Will, seating himself beside the invalid and taking his hand. "I tell you it makes me feel good to see you so spry."

"They thought I was," answered Tom, with a laugh. "The doctor and all. They didn't know the sort of chap I was."

"But good gracious, Tom, folks in Mayville think you are ready for a funeral. They've been telling frightful stories about the way you were hurt. How is it? You look all right in the eyes."

"It's all because I was so badly stunned. The doctor thought my brain was injured. But it's nothing but a sore head and an ugly cut after all. It's set my brains buzzing, but I guess I'll be in shape for the next game of base-ball."

Tom rose and tried to walk across the floor in evidence of his superior strength. But he staggered and would have fallen, had not Will caught him, and brought him back to his chair.

"Come, old chap," cried Will, tenderly. "You're not quite a giant yet, you see. You'd best wait a while before you begin to show off."

"Hang it all, my head got a swimming," answered Tom, in apology. "It's that confounded buzzing. Tell you what, Will, I'd give something nice to know the fellow that hit me. I bet I'd make his head buzz."

"And I'd help you," rejoined Will. "We must lay low for him, and see if we can light on the rascal. But you keep quiet now, and don't try to show off your paces any more. Tell me all about it—if it don't hurt you to talk."

"There isn't much to tell," answered Tom. "I was in the woods out yonder after dark, and something about as heavy as a barrel of sugar lit on my head. That's all I know about it, except that I caught a glimpse of the chap that flung the barrel, but it was too dark to make him out."

"That's very queer. What was it done for?"

"To rob me, I think. I had a package with me that I fancy contained money, and that's gone."

"Who knew that you had money?"

Tom started slightly at this question, but did not seem inclined to answer it. He sat in silence, while Will continued:

"Tell me all about it, Tom. That's the only way to find out the rascal that hurt you. Where did you get this package, who was it for, what took you into that woods before daylight, and—" he hesitated, as if fearing he was going too far.

"And where have I been these three or four days?"

"Why, I don't want to pry into your secrets, Tom."

"It isn't my secret, or I wouldn't mind telling you. I never done anything I'm ashamed of, Will, that ought to be enough. Now let's talk about something else. What's going on at May-

villo? Have you seen my folks? What's dad up to?"

"He's at it again," said Will, with some sense of backwardness.

"Boozing?"

"Yes. And fighting and flinging his money around, they say."

A strange expression came into Tom's face, as if some new idea had dawned upon his brain. He sat for some minutes, in dead silence, while Will continued to chat about Mayville affairs.

Tom seemed rather lost in his own thoughts than listening to him. At length he spoke, with an effort:

"Maybe I'd better lay down, Will. My head's humming again. You can talk on. I like to listen to you, but I can't answer."

Will tenderly helped him into bed, where he sat holding his hand, and speaking to him in a soothing tone, till the eyes of the young invalid showed signs of closing.

"You'll stay with me to-night, Will, won't you?" he asked, sleepily.

"Yes," answered Will.

In five minutes afterward Tom was fast asleep.

Will sent word back to his father, by a young friend who had accompanied him, that he would pass the night with Tom, and arranged with the farmer to do so.

It was eight o'clock the next morning when the two boys awoke. It was a fresh October morning, with the sun shining warmly in the window, and a frosty crispness in the air.

Tom seemed his old self again on waking. The presence of his friend had soothed and aided him, and he rose from bed as lightly and strongly as of old.

The doctor entered at almost the same moment.

He removed the bandage from the invalid's head and examined the wound. It was an ugly cut, several inches in length, and reaching to the bone. But it had been skilfully dressed, and looked promising.

"How does your head feel, this morning?"

"It aches a little," answered Tom. "But all that buzzing and humming's gone, and I feel 'most as strong as ever."

The doctor manipulated the scalp a little, and asked some other questions.

"You are all right, my boy," he finally said.

"I feared that your brain might be injured, but I see that it is sound. It is nothing but a flesh wound after all, and that shows good signs of healing."

"Then I'll soon be sound again?" asked Tom eagerly.

"You ought to be able to jump a five rail fence in a week or two."

"That's good. I feel as if I could now."

"Can I take him to Mayville this morning, in Mr. Jones's carriage?" asked Will.

"We can tell better after an hour or two. If he holds out all right you might venture."

He dressed the wound again, and the boys walked down-stairs, where the farmer had provided them an appetizing breakfast.

Tom ate with a good appetite, enjoying his meal amazingly. He talked also freely and gayly. But for his bandaged head no one would have known that anything ailed him.

As this liveliness held out Will and the farmer concluded that the journey to town might be safely made, without waiting to consult further with the doctor.

The project was accordingly carried out, the invalid being none the worse for his journey, except that he showed some signs of weariness.

Will took him to his own home, declaring that he was not in condition to be placed within reach of his drunken father. To this Tom made no objection. It appeared to him the wisest movement, under the circumstances.

During the remainder of that day and the next Tom's chamber was the scene of a regular ovation. Most of the leading inhabitants of the place called on him, and he was asked a host of questions concerning the circumstances of the outrage, the questioners being particularly anxious to be put on the track of the prowling ruffian who had assailed him.

Tom's answers were very brief and unsatisfactory. He avoided answering as much as he could, on the plea of weakness, and was so non-committal on the subject of his errand, and in regard to the horse which the farmer had heard, as to give rise to some suspicious comments. He made no mention of what he had told Will, that he had been robbed.

Finally visitors were forbidden his room, on plea of weakness, but really from the annoyance of their awkward questions. Only Tom's mother was now admitted to see him. His

father, despite his show of feeling, failed to come near him.

And so passed the two or three days after Tom's advent to Mayville. The wound was rapidly mending. His healthy frame and young blood were full of healing influences, and his strength quickly returned, while the headache and the buzzing in his brain vanished.

It ended by the two boys slipping quietly out of the house and escaping to the fields. Tom was too full of life and spirits to be housed longer.

Yet the affair had excited very unfavorable comments among the town-folks. Their first indignation and anxiety to pursue and capture the assailants was changed to a feeling of suspicion and doubt.

Tom's unwillingness to enter into details, his long absence from home on some mysterious errand, the horse which had been heard to neigh in the grove, all roused again the story of the horse-thefts.

In fact, after two or three months' cessation, the horse-thieves were at work again, and on the very night of Tom's disaster a valuable animal had vanished from the stable of a gentleman living half a mile out of town.

Had Tom Bruce stolen it, tied it in that wood to be removed by his accomplices, and been knocked in the head during some dispute with these accomplices?

It looked questionable, and though many believed Tom thoroughly honest, others were sure that both he and his father were in league with the horse-thieves.

"Jake Bruce has suddenly got flush. Where did he get the money which he is flourishing around this day or two? Last week he was sober and short of cash."

These comments produced such an effect upon the public mind that there was some talk of arresting the father and son on suspicion.

But the lack of any positive evidence checked this idea, and it was thought best to wait and investigate the affair further, before taking any decided action.

Unsuspecting of this dangerous sentiment in the community, the two boys were enjoying themselves in a brisk country walk, in which the fresh air and a happy heart did more good to Tom than would a shop full of medicines. On their return he went to his own home, being unwilling to be a charge upon his friend any longer.

But we must leave him and return to his father, whom we last saw in a startled state at being accosted by a stranger in the street.

Who this stranger was, and what passed between them, must be left for future consideration. It will suffice to say that Jake was greatly sobered at the end of his brief conference with the stranger, and that there was a grave, yet somewhat triumphant expression on his face as he walked onward.

"I've got a ring in his nose, shoot him," he muttered. "I can make him squeal like a pig in a gate, whenever I take a mind. No use fur him to come round here swellin'."

His journey ended at Tony Blink's establishment, while he entered from the rear, as if anxious to keep his visit a secret.

Tony was in, and it was not long before the two men were in busy conference.

"It was so sudden, it most 'made me jump outer my skin," said Jake. "It's like as when a chap gits a tap on his shoulder, and looks round and sees a grizzly bear."

"It was—him?" asked Tony mysteriously.

"No mistake. He's smellin' round yet. Thinks ther's a loose plank in the fence, blast him. I dasen't say much, on account of—you know."

Tony nodded, his face growing pale.

"But I stood up bold, and let him see that I held a full hand. He called me an imperdant dog. Let him flourish, blast him, I'll turn it back on him afore a year."

"Can't you get him away with some lie? You were so boozy that you may have let something out."

"Nary time. His touch on my shoulder was like a bucket o' cold water on my head. It sobered me. And I'm not goin' ter swaller a drop till he slides out. I ain't nobody's idyot."

"The boy is all right again," said Tony, in a half whisper, glancing suspiciously around.

"He's got a cast-iron head, that chap. It runs in the breed," answered Jake, with an oath.

"Not in your breed, Jake."

"He's none o' mine; you know that."

"Well I do. But take care he don't."

"He swears by his dad, Tom does," answered Jake, with a laugh. "He'd guv his head fur

me, that boy would. I don't kear a copper fer that, I bate the whole breed, from granddad down to kid. I've got it in pickle ag'in 'em."

"You heard what Colonel Brown said at the Bald Eagle," rejoined Tony; "'bout somebody else than Tom seeing us out that night. Maybe it's a mistake to lay the blabbing on Tom."

"There ye're off yer legs, Tony. I thought you had more sense. I weren't so drunk but I could see through that dodge. Levi Brown was trying to rig a leader on me. It all came from the kid, drat his long tongue. We're not safe while he's loose, Tony. Twixt him and the old un things look blue."

"You bet they do," said Tony, with a quaver in his voice.

"Leave it to me. Old Jake Bruce ain't ter be discounted by any o' that breed. I'll rig up a settler fur the pair of 'em afore many days. Nobody ever cotched me flingin' up my hand while there was trump cards in it."

"What are your trump cards?" queried Tony. "We're together in this box, and we've got to play together. I must know how you're going to move before I can know how to move myself."

"Them docykments are deadwood on the old 'un; you oughter know that well, Tony. I'm goin' ter squeeze him afore I hand 'em over, and you bet I'm the coon ter do it. As fur the kid, he's got his good p'int, but I don't love him nor none of his kin enough to let him hang me, and blast him, if we don't put the screws on, he'll twist hemp fur the pair of us."

"A long tongue's worse than rank p'ison," rejoined Tony. "We got to do something, Jake. I'm a-shaking inside as if I'd swallowed a nor-wester."

"You allers was a white-livered coward," answered Jake, contemptuously, "but I reckon you ain't fur out in yer notion."

A conference ensued, which lasted for an hour. At the end Jake made his way out in the secret manner of his entrance. The confederates had concocted a dangerous plot for those they mistrusted.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGER IN MAYVILLE.

DURING the few days that followed, Tom Bruce rapidly grew well. The cut on his head healed with remarkable rapidity, and all traces of weakness disappeared. By the end of a week he had discarded the bandage, had taken a ten-mile gallop on horseback, and had been one of the winning side in a game of base-ball.

He was fully himself again, and quite ready to hold his own in the game of life.

In this interval Jake Bruce had kept remarkably sober; and had treated Tom with a gentleness and kindness which were quite equal to that of the cat and the mouse in the fable.

"I'm layin' low fur the galoot as hit you, Tom," he declared. "If I kin git my ten hooks in his hide, I bet I make him squeal wu'ss nor a pig in a gate. Yer old dad ain't goin' ter be sot on that way, youngster, nary time."

Tom was very grateful for this concern. He fancied that his father had kept sober solely on his account, and this roused a strong sense of filial affection in his young heart.

"Dad's sound oak at bottom," he declared, confidently, to his mother. "He's been rough to you and me pretty often, but it's all the whisky. There's not a better man to his family in town when his head's straight."

"I wish it was always straight, then," answered Mrs. Bruce, querulously. "For he's made my life anything but a path of roses."

"It's all rum, mother. If he'd only leave that dreadful stuff alone—"

"Which he never will while he has a mouth to swill it, and legs to carry him to the bar."

The good woman viewed her son with a look that was full of meaning. She evidently would have said more had she dared. As she turned away she shook her head sadly. Something lay behind the scenes in that family, some dark secret that was full of terrors for more than one member of the household.

While these events were taking place within the Bruce domicile, public opinion was equally busy outside. The authorities of the town had made some effort to investigate the circumstances of the assault on Tom, but nothing had come of it. No trace of the assailants had been found.

In fact Tom's lame story had told against him. The belief that he was concerned in the horse-theft grew stronger in the town. The loss of a horse on the night in question, the fact that the farmer had heard a horse in the grove, Tom's absence from town for several days before, his

refusal to throw any light on these mysteries, all told seriously against him.

Though there was no proof that would have told in court, that community had other ways of settling questionable cases.

In the roaring anger and passion of the citizens, it would take little more provocation to justify an appeal to lynch law.

The man who had lost the horse, in particular, was loud in his demonstrations.

"There's got to be an example, gentlemen," he declared, loudly. "That critter had 2.40 blood in him, and I wouldn't have sold him for any man's five hundred. I want satisfaction, if I can't get back the hoss, and there don't seem no show of that. Don't blow to me 'bout the law. There ain't no law west of the Mississippi, except the law of the tree and rope. We've got to snatch and hang a bit afore we'll get a clear moral atmosphere."

As yet, however, the excitement was confined to talk. The people were not roused to the pitch needed to take violent measures. Nor was the evidence against Tom Bruce quite decided enough to justify such measures. A lurking doubt in the minds of many restrained them. They preferred to wait for new revelations.

Meanwhile the feeling in regard to the Huntly murder had by no means died away. Will Corson's testimony, doubtful as it was, had given a new direction to the investigation. It was still quietly but diligently prosecuted, and every movement of Jake Bruce and Tony Blink watched, for something that might throw light upon the affair.

The gentleman whose shoulder tip had so startled Jake Bruce was still in town. His business was not made public, but he had shown so strong an interest in the Huntly murder, that many grew to fancy that he must be a secret detective from some of the large cities, sent for by the authorities of Mayville.

He made a thorough investigation of the Huntly mansion, searching every hiding-place he could discover, as if in quest of evidence.

If he found anything he kept his discovery to himself. A week passed, at the end of which the affair seemed to stand where it did at the beginning.

During this period he had not addressed a word nor given a sign of recognition to Jake Bruce, though meeting him more than once. On Monday of the following week he suddenly accosted that individual.

It was evening, and the place of meeting was a retired one.

The stranger faced Jake, bringing him to a halt, though there was no sign of shrinking on the stolid face of the latter.

"I doubt you, you villain," remarked the stranger, in a stern tone. "You are playing double with me. By Heaven, if I catch you playing double I'll make the United States hot quarters for you!"

"You're welcome," answered Jake, with insolent coolness. "Do your prettiest. I wasn't born in the woods to be skeered by an owl."

"You had a hand in that Huntly murder, Jake Bruce."

"Be a leetle keerful how you spout, Gordon. That's rough talk."

"I happen to know who it's addressed to. You have those papers?"

"Have I? I won't say yes nor no to that till you tell me what papers ye're chattin' 'bout. I'm kinder in the dark on that subject."

"You lie, you scoundrel! No one knows better than you what I mean."

"Don't be rubbin' it in, Gordon," warned Jake. "I've got a heavy fist if you wake it up."

"You dare not strike me, you hound. I will hang you if you do."

"I rather doubt that," rejoined Jake, with a loud laugh of derision. "If it comes ter a hangin' match, look out you don't git your neck in a pickle. I wasn't born no fool, Gordon, and I wasn't educated no fool."

The stranger looked Jake intently in the face as if seeking to discover his meaning.

"I know you better than you imagine," he remarked in a tone of indignation. "And I advise you not to presume too much on my forbearance. An accident happened to your charge a few days ago. Let no more such accidents happen, on your peril. I warn you again, ruffian, that if you injure him you shall swing for it. That is my last word, remember it."

He walked away without waiting for a response. Jake followed him with his eyes, while varied emotions passed over his face.

"Wonder if he's got the spunk to do it?" he asked himself. "He's got a touch of the devil in him when he's raised, and he smells a rat 'bout

that Huntly business—smells it strong, drat him!"

"But I've a big notion that I hold the whip hand of the whole caboodle. As fur the kid, it's hang or hang. He'll hang me if I don't hang him. But if ther law hangs him I ain't 'countable fur that, am I? Nary time.—You dunno the sort o' tree you're climbin', Ned Gordon. Nor you don't happen ter smell out the little bit o' financial biz between me and Paul Bert. You bet the old wolf's got to fork out lively arter the kid goes under."

There was a deep significance in the laugh that followed his words. It was so malignant and triumphant that it seemed to come from the lips of Mephistopheles rather than a human being.

On the next day the stranger disappeared from Mayville.

If he was a special detective, as some persons imagined, he had either discovered nothing, or had gone elsewhere to work up his discoveries.

Jake Bruce was as silent about his disappearance as he had been about his appearance, but he celebrated it in a characteristic way, namely, by filling himself so full of whisky that his skin seemed ready to burst.

He blustered, quarreled, and roared as usual, and might have got into some dangerous affray had not Tony succeeded in coaxing him home.

"You've got to stay with me to-night," he said. "You're too drunk to go home, raising a row in your family. And it ain't safe after your boy has just got over his hurt. It might be dangerous to excite him."

These remarks were accompanied with a meaning look, which had more in it than the words.

"I ain't half so drunk as them fools take me fer," rejoined Jake. "I kin carry more whisky in my hide than ten of 'em. Reckon, though, I oughter be took keer of a little, and you kin tote me home, Tony."

Two days more passed, which were principally occupied by Jake in getting sober.

By the end of that time Tom had become fully himself again. His strength and vitality had completely returned, and but for the long red scar which was revealed by his clipped hair, no trace of his recent assault would have remained.

"It's kind of tender yet, dad," he said to his father, in a conversation that arose between them. "But I'd never know anything was wrong if I kept my fingers away from it. I s'pose I'll keep feeling it till I get hold of the fellow that hit me, and then I'll feel him."

Jake laughed heartily at these words.

"You're a chip of the old block," he cried. "Ther's only one bad job 'bout the bizness as it stands now."

"What is that?"

"The chap as salted you, robbed you, durn him! He's left me so blazin' poor that I haven't got three coppers to rub together in my pocket."

Tom turned toward him on hearing these words.

"Where did you get the money you have been spending for whisky?" he asked. "The money you wanted to match five and ten-dollar gold-pieces with?"

His tone had more of doubt and suspicion than he probably intended. Jake looked up with an ugly frown on his face. He seemed about to speak harshly, but he checked himself, and answered in a quiet tone:

"It don't take much for me to get drunk on, Tom. And when I'm loaded with whisky I kin brag louder on an empty pocket than most people kin on a full one."

"I thought it strange where you got so much money," muttered Tom, in reply.

"I've got to have money, Tom. I can't live without it. And as long as you lost that pile I reckon I'll have to send you fur another divvy."

"What! On a night ride again, and over the Mississippi?" cried Tom. "Not much. I don't like such shady doings, and I told you the last time I wouldn't go again unless you let me into the secret."

"Bless yer soul, boy," cried Jake, with a great show of heartiness, "there ain't no secret 'bout it; that 's, so far as you and me's consarned, though I wouldn't like to blaze it out to everybody. I didn't want to tell you neither, for fear you mought look down on yer old dad, 'kaze I'll have to tell some things as I reckon I oughter be 'shamed of. But then, you're near a man grown now."

"Go on, dad; let me hear it," said Tom. "I suspect that you have led a wild life."

"The gist on't is that old Jake Bruce isn't quite so poor a dog as some folks take him fur. I've got a nice property over in Tennessee, my boy, that'll be yourn some day."

"Then why do you live here?"

"Bless yer eyes, I had to make tracks. I done somethin' that got the constables on my trail, and they'd locked me up fur ten years if I hadn't dug out. Don't ax me what it was, Tom. No use to rake up them kind of by-gones."

"I'd rather not know," answered Tom, with a sickly feeling.

"I'm in hidin' here, Tom, that's a fact, but my property's in the hands of a good stout friend, who pays me well fur the use of it. But it's got to be done on the sly, 'kaze they're squintin' arter me yet, over in Tennessee. I used to go meet him myself, but lately I've got ter sendin' you, fur he hinted as it was risky fur me."

"But it's not two weeks since he gave me money. He won't have it again so soon."

"Don't you mind that. I've writ him. I want you to go, Tom. You'll find the hoss in the old place."

"Where does that horse come from?" asked Tom. "That's as great a mystery as the other!"

"My friend t'other side the river 'tends to all that. I've got to keep outer it altogether. What d'ye say, Tom? Will you go?"

"This once, I suppose. But I don't like the business, dad, and that's flat."

CHAPTER XI.

A NIGHT OF ADVENTURE.

It was the second night after the events just recorded. Tom Bruce left his home about ten o'clock in the evening, after a few hours slumber.

He made his way toward the grove, where he found a horse awaiting him on the previous occasion.

The night was dark. Heavy clouds o'erspread the sky, and a chill and gusty wind howled at intervals along the road.

But all that troubled not the young adventurer. Every step on the road was familiar to him, while the chill of the air had no effect on his warm young blood.

He felt as strong and hearty as before his hurt, and was excited and enlivened by the thought of the wild night ride before him. His love for adventure had made him enter into the scheme with little opposition.

Meanwhile, events were progressing in Mayville. That very day a meeting of citizens had been held for the purpose of discussing the Huntly murder. Colonel Levi Brown presided, and the meeting took the phase of a Vigilance Committee.

Suspicion rested strongly on Jake Bruce and Tony Blink as the murderers, though, as must be confessed, on very slight grounds. There was not an ounce of evidence against them, except that Will Corson had seen two men not unlike them on the night of the murder.

But not even lynch-law could convict men of murder on no more evidence than this.

"It's my opinion that they ought to be arrested and held on suspicion," declared Harry Smith, one of the townsmen. "Their houses have not been searched yet. We may find some hanging proof there."

"We had best make the search first and the arrest afterward, if anything is found," suggested another.

"And give them the chance to make way with what we want? Do you calculate they'd leave us a scrap of evidence?"

"We can look out for that. We're not quite fools."

"It is my opinion," said Colonel Brown, "that no hasty movement is judicious. I should advise an examination of the young man, Thomas Bruce. You remember what his father acknowledged, when drunk, at the Bald Eagle. The boy certainly knows something about it, and should be pinched till he tells."

"That's a good idea. A rope around his neck might squeeze the truth out of him."

"No, sir, no violent measures," said Samuel Wilson. "We want the truth, not a lie extorted by torture. The boy is as honest as any man in this room, I'll swear that, and he's got to be handled on the square."

"That's so," declared another. "I believe in Tom Bruce, if he has got a sot of a father."

It was finally decided to let the matter stand until the next morning, when an adjourned meeting could be held, the boy examined, and the houses of Blink and Bruce searched.

All this had been conducted with the utmost secrecy, and yet wind of it was abroad before an hour had passed.

It even reached, in shadowy form, the ears of the principal persons concerned.

Shortly after ten o'clock that night, Jake Bruce met his confederate in a retired spot, beyond danger of ear-dropping.

"The trap's laid," he said to him in a voice but little above a whisper. "The kid's gone. We have an hour to work in, and the night's a prime one, Tony."

"You've heard what's in the wind?"

"No."

"There's been a private meeting held, and a sort of Vigilance Committee rigged up. They're arter us, Jake. It's my notion we're going to be searched and snatched to-morrow."

"Let 'em search. They'll find nothin' in my house."

"Nor in mine. But how about them documents?"

"Them dokuments is safe salted, now you bet. Jake Bruce ain't no blind beetle."

"That ain't all. The boy's to be questioned. You let the cat's tail out of the bag that night you were drunk, Jake."

"They mought have uglier bizness with the boy," answered Jake, with a mysterious wink. "Bless my eye, what a puff that was," as a blast of wind nearly took him off his feet. "It's an angel of a night, Tony. Folks'll be afeard to poke their snoots out o' doors, 'cept seasoned coons like you an me. Dig out now, old hoss. Time's up."

"All serene," answered Tony, moving away.

Jake followed him at a cautious distance, in a lurking fashion, watching keenly to right and left.

It was evident that the pair had some questionable business on foot.

Meanwhile the young adventurer made his way cheerily, along the road, at a free pace, whistling for company, and buttoning his coat tightly around him to keep out the wind.

It was about half past eleven when he reached the vicinity of the grove. A drizzling rain had been falling for the last hour, and the weather was growing thoroughly disagreeable.

"It ain't nobody's picnic this time," muttered Tom. "I'd sooner be at home abed than on the road a night like this. Lucky for me I ain't made of sugar or salt."

It was now pitch dark, and he had some difficulty in finding the grove of which he was in search, and greater difficulty in making his way into its center. He did this with great caution, remembering his recent experience.

It was full midnight when he at length reached the tree where he expected to find the horse.

Yet a loud trampling and rustling of leaves guided him, while a moment afterward a horse gave unmistakable evidence of his presence.

"There he is again," cried Tom in wonder. "It beats me where them horses come from. It's a dodge too deep for me to see bottom."

He wasted no time in conjectures, however. In a few minutes, after running blindly against half a dozen trees in the darkness, he succeeded in leading the animal to the road.

A minute more sufficed him to mount and away, the mud splashing to right and left as the horse dashed onward.

And so the horse and rider vanished into the gloom of the night.

At almost the same hour an exciting incident took place in Mayville.

A loud knocking came upon the door of the showy mansion in which resided Colonel Levi Brown, and the door-bell rung furiously.

This was continued for some ten minutes, the noise of the storm partly drowning the uproar.

Finally some one within seemed to be roused; a window was heard to lift on the second floor, and a sleepy head looked out.

"What's broke loose below there? Who's that thundering on the door?"

"Is that you, colonel?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Get dressed, and come down-stairs at once."

"What for? It's no night to go abroad on a blind errand."

"There's bad work afloat. Your stable door's wide open, and your horses kickin' round like wild. Is that the way you leave things at night?"

"No. Who are you?"

"Harry Smith."

"A right. I'll be down in a minute."

It was little more than a minute when he descended. Smith explained that he had been out late at a card party, and on his way home had heard such an uproar in the stable that he fancied something must be wrong.

"The horse-thieves are not all hung yet, you know."

"None of them, more's the pity," said the colonel. "The stable door's open, you say? I locked it myself, that I'm sure of."

A very short time brought them to the stable.

As Smith had said, the door stood wide open, and the horses were very uneasy, probably in consequence of the chill blasts that searched every corner of the building.

"The wind may have done it," said the colonel, as he lighted a lantern. "But I don't see how. The lock is a good one."

The lantern quickly threw new light upon the case. The three horses, which Colonel Brown kept in his stables, were reduced to two. His favorite saddle-horse, a fast-going bay, had vanished.

A hasty examination added to the evidence. Saddle and bridle were gone, as well as horse. The lock of the stable-door was found on the ground, broken, and looking as if it had been opened with a hammer blow.

A closer search revealed, in the stall of the stolen horse, a scrap of paper, written on in a disguised hand:

"COLONEL LEVI BROWN:—

"You have bragged a bit too much about what you were going to do to the horse-thieves. This is our answer: Catch us first and hang us after."

"ADAM LIGHTFOOT."

The colonel was more enraged at this missive than at the loss of his horse.

"I'll do it, I promise you, if I catch you once," he declared, through set teeth. "And by Heaven, you're playing with edge-tools when you wake me up! Something must be done at once, Mr. Smith. Where have you been playing? Are the folks awake at the Bald Eagle?"

"There were lights there when I came past."

"Then let us make haste there. Messengers must be sent out to give warning, late and stormy as it is. There is only one way to head off these thieves. I'd give a cool hundred if the telegraph, which they've got all through the East, had only reached this far."

"There's a line to Franklin, and that's only twelve miles off," suggested Smith. "An office was opened there last week."

"Then messages must be sent out from there to every point the wires reach. Come, there's no time to lose."

Buttoning their coats against the blast, they made their way to the Bald Eagle Saloon, whose people proved to be yet up.

The news brought threw all the inmates of that establishment into a fever of excitement. Colonel Levi was willing to pay well for messengers, while a half-dozen volunteers asked no reward to pursue the horse-thieves.

"We've got the chance now," it was declared.

"They haven't more than two hours' start, at the most, and if we can't run them down this time, we may as well give up the job. Don't talk 'bout money, kurnel. We want no better reward than a chance to swing them infernal hounds."

The rain had now slackened to a slight drizzle, of no importance to those weather-hardened Westerners.

In half an hour more five horsemen were off in different directions, making their way to the surrounding towns and villages. It was their purpose to give the alarm, and put people on guard at every point they reached, and to dash ahead until daylight, rousing the whole country far and wide.

One rapid rider made Franklin his goal, with the purpose of telegraphing the news to every place reached by the wires. As yet, however, there were offices only in the larger towns toward the Mississippi. The telegraph was still in its infancy in that region.

The night passed slowly on. Mayville sunk again into slumber, though a very nervous and excited slumber. North, south, east and west, horses' hoofs splashed through the mud. At every hamlet and village the innkeepers were aroused, told the news, and put on the lookout for the stolen horse.

Levi Brown's bay trotter was well known to many of them. With others a clear description was left. The tidings of the horse-theft was rapidly spreading in a circle around Mayville.

Day dawned at length—a gray and somber day. The rain had ceased, but the clouds hung heavy and threatening.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning that Tom Bruce rode into Ivanstown, the place where he had breakfasted on his former journey.

Horse and rider alike were splashed so thickly with mud, that it spread over them like a single coat. And they were both well worn out with their night's journey.

Tom dried himself before a cheerful fire in the bar-room, and brushed off the thickest of the mud from his clothes, while his breakfast was preparing.

It was half-past nine when he was again ready for the road.

"Order out my horse, landlord," he said. "The animal has done a good night's work, but he must do ten miles more before I can let him off."

The hostler led up the animal. As in the case of his master, he had been relieved of some of his coat of mud. He proved to be a medium-sized bay, with slender limbs, but strong flanks and shoulders.

"He's got thirty miles in him yet, if I choosed to push him to it," said Tom, as he seated himself in the saddle, and took the reins.

"He's not got thirty yards," came the stern answer, as a stalwart man grasped the bridle near the bit, and faced the young rider.

"What do you mean? Let go that bridle!" cried Tom, hotly.

"Not much, my young blood. This is a stolen hoss, and I'm the Constable of Ivanstown. I've just got word that Levi Brown's bay was stolen from Mayville last night, and I happen to know this is the hoss. Slide down, youngster, ye're my prisoner. And by all that's good, I wouldn't be in your skin just now for a bagful of dollars."

CHAPTER X.

AN EXCITEMENT IN MAYVILLE.

At about the hour of the arrest of Tom Bruce, a committee of citizens called at the Bruce domicile to request the presence of that young gentleman at a meeting then being held at Colonel Brown's house.

The horse-theft of the night before had roused the people to a dangerous pitch of excitement, and it was decided that it was about time to put a stop to that kind of business.

Colonel Brown's energetic proceedings were universally approved, and it was declared that more stringent measures must be taken in regard to the Huntly murder.

The moral atmosphere of the town wanted clearing, and it was their business to clear it.

The committee who had been sent to bring Tom Bruce for examination, returned empty-handed. The lad had left home the night before on a visit to his aunt in St. Louis, was the answer they had received, a reply which was deemed suspicious.

"Where is Jake Bruce, the boy's father?" was the query.

"Down at Tony Blink's, swilling whisky," was the reply. "He's been busy getting drunk ever since daybreak."

"That doesn't look as if he had anything to do with the colonel's horse," remarked one person.

"Except it's a dodge to cover his tracks," said another.

"There's no use beating round the bush, gentlemen," broke in a third. "If we're going to search for evidence of the Huntly murder, now's the time. I vote the Bruce and Blink houses be searched."

"That's for the authorities to do," rejoined Mr. Wilson. "We have no right to set aside the law."

"That for the authorities," broke out Harry Smith, snapping his fingers. "The citizens are the law, in these diggings, and if we don't strike while the iron's hot we'd best drop our hammers. If these men smell a rat once, all's up."

Further conference brought them to the decision that the houses of the suspected parties should be searched, without waiting for the slow process of the law, and committees were appointed for that purpose, strong enough to bear down all opposition. It was accordingly done as directed. At the Bruce mansion only Mrs. Bruce was found, and the committee, paying no heed to her protests, began a rigid search of the house.

At Tony Blink's house, where both the suspected parties were found in the bar-room, they were taken temporarily into custody, while the search proceeded.

"Go ahead, hosses, if you think there's no hereafter," cried Jake, defiantly. "But if I don't make Rome howl fur this outrage, there's no snakes. I know the whole gang on ye, and there's some law in Arkansas yit. We'll see, my covies, who's goin' to win in this game."

"All right, Jake; you can have your innings after we've had ours," was the curt answer. "It's our notion that there's law enough in Arkansas to hang you. And if there ain't, we can splice it out with lynch law."

"Drive ahead, my joll," roared Jake, "but I wasn't born in the woods to be skeered by an owl. Brag's a good dog, but look out fur old Holdfast."

He was justified in his defiance. Nothing came from the search. Every nook and corner of both houses, and every article of furniture and scrap of paper in the same were thoroughly examined, but nothing having the least bearing on the Huntly affair, or otherwise of a suspicious character, was found.

The searching parties at length gave up their labor, nonplused at its useless result. They were thoroughly disappointed, and began to fear that they had been too hasty, in acting without due process of law.

Jake's violent threats of legal redress did not make them any more comfortable.

"I weren't brung up a lawyer," he declared, "but I ain't quite a fool, neither. And if I don't salt you coons fur this day's work, ther's no use talkin'. I'm goin' in fur ten thousand damages, fur disturbin' the home and castle of a 'Merican citizen. And Tony Blink's got ter strike fur as big a pony. Look out, old hosses; ye've woke up ther wrong grizzly, this time."

The meeting of citizens had been adjourned till three o'clock that afternoon, awaiting the results of the search.

At that hour it was called together again, and the report presented. It proved to be a disappointing one. Not a speck of evidence had been discovered connecting Bruce or Blink with the murder, and the Huntly affair was as great a mystery as ever.

It began to look as if it would never be cleared up. It was falling into the line of those mysterious murders of which so many are on the dockets of the police, and which promise to remain mysteries till the day of judgment.

The conference that followed was broken by an unexpected and startling incident.

A loud rattle of hoofs came down the street, as of a horse pushed at full gallop. It halted before the house at which the meeting was being held, and Joe Hardy, one of the messengers of the preceding night, sprung from the saddle, and strode hastily into the house.

The next moment he entered the room where the meeting was in session, with a face full of important news.

The conference suddenly ended, and every eye was turned toward him, with excited expectation.

"What is it, Joe?" "Hit anything?" "Any news of the horse-thieves?" were the queries.

"You bet!" said Joe, sententiously.

"Come! Out with it!"

"The coon's been nabbed," answered Joe. "And a-ridin' that very identical hoss."

"Who is it? Where was it? Tell us all about it!"

"The place was Ivantown, and the fellar was young Tom Bruce, the chap as I allus swore was the one!"

This announcement caused a perfect burst of exclamations.

"Tom Bruce! You are sure? There's no mistake?"

"I've jist rid through, at top speed, from that there place. I see'd the loss myself, and the young scrapegrace on it. I don't reckon ther's anybody here'll say I don't know Kurnel Brown's bay."

"Where is he? When will he be here? The scoundrelly young ruffian. This explains his mysterious journeys. The rope's twisted for his neck. And fer the old one, too, if he's mixed in it. When will he be here, Joe?"

"When you send for him. I had him nabbed by the Ivantown constable, jist as he was pushin' on fur his hidin'-place. He's locked up there now, waitin' fur a requisition."

The meeting at once broke up in the utmost excitement. Those who had taken the side of Tom Bruce were silenced.

His enemies were jubilant. There was already dark talk of lynch law, and of giving a terrible example to the horse-thieves. But first of all the culprit must be brought to Mayville, and a requisition was at once obtained from the proper officers.

Meanwhile, the exciting tidings spread rapidly through the town, and was not long in reaching the ears of those most interested in the culprit, through the good offices of gossiping friends.

It was noon of the succeeding day when the youthful prisoner was brought back to Mayville, in custody of the constable of that town.

The stolen horse was brought back at the same time.

Nearly all the inhabitants of the place had turned out to see the culprit, whose advent had become an event of great importance to the excited citizens.

There was no question about the horse. It was recognized by everybody as Colonel Brown's bay.

But it was in the demeanor of the prisoner that most persons were interested. He sat beside the constable, in the road-wagon of the latter, with a pale but not downcast face, and with a look of earnest resolution in his clear eyes.

It was a very different aspect from what the people had expected.

The throng was by no means quiet. Dozens of cries arose, most of them revengeful and threatening, while remarks of the most unflattering character were made in the prisoner's hearing.

He winced somewhat at these demonstrations. A painful expression passed over his face, but the look of fixed endurance continued, while his eyes seemed to look over the crowd, and to be fixed on the far distance.

Yet the situation must have been terribly painful to him, and the constable hastened to bring it to an end, by whipping up his horse.

In ten minutes afterward Tom Bruce was the occupant of a prison cell, in the small and not very strong lockup of Mayville.

On the very verge of manhood his career threatened to be brought to a sudden and disgraceful termination.

Aft r the closing of the prison door the town settled down into some semblance of quiet. Yet the excitement continued undiminished. In every quarter strong talk upon the situation was indulged in, and dark threats were in more than one mouth.

The legal penalty for horse-theft was far from sufficient in the existing state of public feeling, and it was evident that little would be needed to stir the community to the commission of illegal violence.

The prisoner was given an informal hearing before a magistrate that same evening. The result but deepened the feeling against him. He refused to enter into the particulars of the affair.

He told where he had got the horse, but as to the purpose of his journey, or his knowledge of how the animal had got there, not a word could be drawn from him.

"That is matter for the court," he said, firmly. "I have been advised to keep silent till my case

comes to a trial. When that happens I will tell all I know. For the present I have nothing more to say."

And nothing more satisfactory could be got from him, question as they would.

He was next examined as to what he knew concerning the Huntly murder. Had he seen his father and Tony Blink abroad on that night?

To this query Tom had no answer. It evidently took him by surprise, but he kept an obstinate silence.

He was remanded to jail, to await his trial.

While these events were proceeding Jake Bruce had spent his time in a state of drunkenness. He had kept out of sight of his unfortunate son, and roamed from one bar-room to another swilling whisky until apparently almost too full to walk.

People talked freely before him, judging him too drunk to heed their remarks.

Finally one of the more decent landlords refused him any more liquor, and he reeled home, cursing as if he had been bitterly insulted.

Mrs. Bruce, somewhat recovered from the shock of the distressing news she had heard met him as he entered.

"What are you going to do in this matter?" she demanded, with unusual resolution for her, seizing him by the shoulder. "It is all your work, Jake Bruce. You have laid this trap for the boy."

Jake's reeling motion had ceased, and he spoke in a tone which showed that much of his late drunkenness had been assumed.

"S'pose I have," he uttered. "What are you goin' to do 'bout it?"

"It is a deadly shame," she ejaculated. "The boy shall not hang to please your spite. Do you understand me, Jake Bruce?"

"I understand this much, that I'll kill you if you blow on me. I'll kill you, do you hear? And when I say kill, I mean kill."

He shook the poor woman as though she had been a reed in his grasp, while his eyes blazed with fury. "I love the boy, and I will not stand by and see him hung," she feebly repeated.

"If you say a word louder than a mouse's whisper I'll split yer skull as I would a log of wood. I hate the kid and all his kin. And so do you. You swore revenge on his father. Have you forgot that? You swore a deep oath that you'd never rest till you had retribution."

"I do not care for that. It was in excitement I did it. Tom has been a good boy to you and me. He cannot be held responsible for the doings of others. I love him, and I will not see him come to harm."

"I tell you, woman, he'll hang me if I don't hang him. It's life for life between us. Do you hear me? You want a settler, I see!"

He snatched up an ax from the hearth, caught her by the shoulder, and brandished it over her head, while fury blazed in his face.

"Swear that you'll hold your tongue, or by St. Peter, I'll brain you! Swear!"

Frightened by her imminent danger, the poor woman did as he commanded, shrinking to the floor in her mortal terror.

He released her then, and strode the floor still brandishing the ax, and cursing like a demon in his excited fury.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRISONER'S HEARING.

It was a bitter night that Tom Bruce passed in his prison cell. Scarcely a moment's sleep came to him through the night. The bed was hard, the cell chilly, everything about it uncomfortable, but it was not to this he owed his wakefulness.

With a quiet mind he could have slept soundly on an oak log in an open field.

It was partly the disgrace of his situation that troubled him; but his greatest uneasiness came from the distressing dilemma in which he was placed.

He knew not what to think. Had a trap been set for him? But if so, by whom? Not his father; he could not believe it was his father.

A half dozen times before he had obtained a horse from the same situation, and returned it there, without anything resulting from it. How was it that on this occasion a stolen horse was placed there to entrap him?

A thousand doubts flowed through his mind, but he drove away all that implicated his father.

Despite Jake Bruce's drunkenness and occasional violence, Tom had a son's affection for him, and could not let himself think that his "dad" had anything to do with the trap set for him.

It must be the mysterious individual whom he had met in the Tennessee grove, and who he had been told provided the horse.

Yet could he tell the whole truth without endangering his father? The complication was an awkward one. To tell his story in full might hang his father. That he determined he would not do, whatever befell.

But to keep silent would hang himself. And even if he told all he knew he might be disbelieved, and treated as an accomplice of the thieves.

Morning came ere he got rid of his multitude of exciting thoughts in a broken sleep. He had determined on one thing only—to shield his father to the utmost, whatever the consequence.

"I thought for awhile that he had a hand in knocking me down and robbing me that morning," he soliloquized; "for he had money the next day. But what good would that have done him, when I was bringing the money straight to him?"

"There's a mystery about it all that I can't make out. Some enemy is trying to ruin us. Who is it? That I cannot tell. But I dare not reveal the

whole truth, lest I hang my father, and fail to save myself."

Sleep now came on him, which clung to him till midday. Exhausted nature had at length declared itself.

Meanwhile the town had become divided into two parties, one favoring the innocence of Tom Bruce, the other sure of his guilt.

The former was principally made up of the boys, with Will Corson at their head. They could not be made to believe that a lad like Tom could become a horse-thief, and vowed that he was a victim of some treachery.

Some few of the men and women of the town favored this view, but the majority believed him guilty, and were bent on making a severe example of the young thief.

The court and jail of the county were in a town some ten miles distant, but the people of Mayville had no idea of giving up their prize to the slow and uncertain process of the law, if they could avoid it. They preferred to take the law into their own hands ere the authorities could take any decisive action.

This Will Corson determined to prevent. He set out at noon that day for the country town, to apprise the proper officers of the danger of illegal violence, and to warn them of the necessity of removing the prisoner from the hands of the excited people of Mayville.

He tried to keep this journey a secret, but news of it came out in the town, arousing general indignation.

"The young busybody! I move we splice him up and give him a round dozen, when he comes back. There's no other way to teach these conceited boys' sense."

"It ain't easy to put smoke back into a bag after it's got out," was the reply. "We've got to dig in at once, or the job'll be took out of our hands."

This was the general view of the case, and a meeting of citizens was at once called, which organized itself into a sort of Vigilance Committee.

Colonel Brown, who had been bitterly revengeful since the loss of his horse, presided.

"Give the boy the chance we would give to a burglar or murderer," suggested Mr. Wilson. "Don't condemn him unheard. He has had a night's time to think over the matter, and may be ready now to tell the whole truth about the business."

This view of the affair was accepted as a proper one, and the youthful prisoner was ordered to be brought before the meeting.

Informal as this process was, it had the support of the great majority of the citizens, the authorities of Mayville being powerless to oppose it, even if they had not been in sympathy with the proceedings.

Tom was brought before them. Every eye was fixed upon his face with curiosity as to his bearing.

He was pale and disturbed, that was evident; yet he showed no signs of flinching, while his blue eyes were full of earnestness and resolution.

The examination was conducted by a semi-lawyer of the town, who had some experience in cross-questioning.

But he found the prisoner anything but a ready witness.

"I found the horse in the grove where I was hurt some time ago," acknowledged Tom. "That he was stolen I did not dream. Who left him there I cannot tell."

"How did you know you would find him there?"

"I had been told so. I was sent on an expedition for which the horse was provided without my knowledge."

"Who sent you on this expedition?"

"I decline to tell."

"Who told you that the horse would be at that spot?"

"I decline to tell. All I can say is that on a half-dozen occasions I have made such expeditions, and found horses in that spot. None of these were stolen horses. I know no more than you who put them there."

"What did you do with these horses?"

"I left them where I had found them. The horse that Mr. Jones heard in the grove the morning I was hurt, was one I had just left there."

"Who removed that horse?"

"I cannot answer. It is as great a mystery to me as to you."

"That story is a lame one," broke in Colonel Brown severely. "A horse was stolen that night from Mr. Ripka's stable. That grove seems to be the delivery-place of the horse-thieves. You, as a ready rider, are engaged to run them from that spot to their hiding-place. The affair is clear as daylight."

The murmur of applause showed that most of those present agreed with him.

"That is your theory, Colonel Brown," answered Tom boldly. "I will show you, when the proper time comes that it is not a sound one."

"I beg that there will be no interruption," said the lawyer, with a show of displeasure. "I am conducting this examination. You say that you used these horses on certain secret expeditions. Do you refuse to tell what was the nature of these expeditions?"

"I will tell what I know," answered Tom. "They were mysteries to me as well as to you. I know that my absences from town have been talked of, but I was acting under orders."

"Under whose orders?"

"That I decline to answer."

He proceeded to tell the story with which the reader is already acquainted; of his night rides from the grove where he had found the horses to Ivantown; his breakfasting there; his change of horses at an inn ten miles further on; his ride to the Mis-

Mississippi, and his journey across that river; his mysterious twilight interviews with the unknown gentleman on the Tennessee shore; the package he had received from this partly-masked personage; his ride back, and his leaving the horse he had ridden in the spot where he had found him. As to who placed the horse there and took him from there he was utterly ignorant.

The audience listened in absorbing silence to this strange narration, though the satirical smile and the faces of many showed that they believed it to be manufactured for the occasion.

"We are past the days of fairy tales," remarked Colonel Brown severely. "Such a ridiculous story is an insult to the intelligence of this meeting."

"When I am put properly on trial I will prove all I have said," answered Tom steadily. "All the persons I have mentioned, the inn-people at Ivans-town, the boatman, and all the rest of them can be brought as witnesses. If I was riding on stolen horses would I bring them back two days afterward to Ivans-town?"

"Not if you had your wits about you," cried a voice in the crowd.

"Very well. I can prove by the landlord and stablemen that I did so."

This declaration, and the firm voice and steady bearing of the speaker, evidently made an impression in his favor. People looked at one another, and some whispering took place. Tom had scored a strong point. Yet many faces continued unyieldingly hostile.

"What was the destination of the package which you received in Tennessee?" asked the lawyer.

Tom continued silent, in a reflecting attitude.

"What did you do with it, I say? Did you bring it home?"

"Yes," was the hesitating answer.

"And gave it to your father?"

"Yes."

"What did it contain?"

"I do not know."

"But I do," answered the lawyer. "And I fancy you could give a shrewd guess. Your secret disappearances have been observed in Mayville. And after every one of them your father, who has not done a day's work since he lived in the town, has his pockets full of money, and goes on a grand drunk. You know this, at least?"

"I object to bringing my father into the question," answered Tom resolutely.

"No doubt. You are a good son to a bad father. You have heard all that has been said, gentlemen. The prisoner will not tell him who sends him on these expeditions, but it is clear enough to any man of sense. It is Jake Bruce, who is making the boy a victim to some underhand scheme of his own. It is my opinion that we had better release the son and arrest the father."

"Your opinion ain't worth a brass farthing," cried Colonel Brown, in a rage. "It is a sure thing that this boy was found on my horse, which was stolen out of my stable. And that's more to the point than all the fairy stories he can invent. Are grown men like us to be stuffed with such nonsense as that a drunken sot, like Jake Bruce, has somebody who mysteriously supplies him with money?"

"The money, I tell you, is part of the proceeds for stolen horses. There is a gang of horse-thieves operating in this county. We have nailed one of them, in this boy. And I fancy we will soon nail another, in his father. That's my view of the case."

"And mine. And mine," came from twenty voices through the hall.

"The accused must have a legal trial," exclaimed the lawyer, positively. "If he can prove what he declares, the law will clear him. We should want nothing but justice."

"Justice is one thing. The loop-holes of the law are another," cried an angry voice. "You lawyers can twist plain murder into baby's play, but you can't come that over us. They are rigging up a scheme, fellow-citizens, to clear this infernal young boss-thief. Are we going to let them play it on us?"

"No! no!" came in a peal of voices through the hall.

The confusion now became too great for further proceedings, both sides angrily arguing and declaiming. The prisoner was finally remanded to the lock-up, and the meeting broke up in great excitement. Tom had evidently won some friends, but he had a host of bitter and determined foes.

Not long afterward Will Carson returned from the county town, bringing word that the constable and sheriff were absent, and would not be able to come for the prisoner till late the next day.

It was sought to confine his information to the friends of the prisoner, but it leaked out during the next day, adding greatly to the excited state of public feeling.

"I'll tell you what it is, lads," cried a rampant orator at the Bald Eagle, "these boss-thieves has got to be put down, and that's only one way to put 'em down, and that's by hangin' 'em up; any fool knows that. Tom Bruce stole the kurnel's hoss; that's as plain as the nose on a man's face. But let 'em git it in the courts one't, and it'll be as hard to see as a skeeter's eye. There's only one judge in this State of Arkansas that's wuth shucks, and that's Judge Lynch. The boy'll be let off with a year or two in jail, at the worst, and hosses'll slide out o' stables as fast as ever. The rope's the best cure fur a boss-thief, and every fool ought to know that."

This view of the case seemed to take. Twenty voices were raised in support of it. Yet no one seemed willing to raise the standard of open violence, and the day slowly glided on toward the night.

CHAPTER XII.

A DESPERATE AFFRAY.

At five o'clock that evening a carriage drove into Mayville, whose advent was attended with much excitement. Its inmates were recognized at a glance by many of the people as the sheriff and constable of Dover, the county town.

The news spread like wildfire through the town, and while these officials were putting up their horses, excited groups gathered at the various corners, and much incendiary talk was indulged in.

The officers went somewhat deliberately to work. They called on the authorities of Mayville, showed their warrant for the delivery of the prisoner, and then proceeded quietly toward the lock-up.

They apparently were not aware of the state of public feeling.

It was now fully six o'clock, and darkness was settling rapidly over the town.

On reaching the building in which the prisoner was confined they found it to be surrounded by a crowd of excited men.

These faced them somewhat irresolutely, as if in doubt what action to take. There was at first some show of preventing their entrance.

But the two officials, who recognized these signs of public feeling, knew well what they were about.

They walked boldly into the throng, and pressed resolutely through, forcing to the right and left with little ceremony all who refused to move. There was some growling, but no firm opposition.

The officers reached the door of the lock-up, opened it with the key that had been given them, and entered. So far their enterprise promised success.

The cell of the prisoner was quickly reached and opened. Tom raised his head and gazed through the gathering darkness upon his visitors.

"Stir up, my friend," said the sheriff. "We are come to take you to Dover. But it looks as if we were not going to get out of this town without trouble. Do you want to stay here and be lynched?"

"No."

"Then you must stick to us. Come."

Tom, with an impulse of hope, sprang to his feet and followed. A minute took them to the door of the jail.

On opening it and looking out, they saw that a decided change had taken place in the position of affairs.

The darkness had increased in the interval. Of the mass through which they had pushed their way but about thirty now remained. But these were grouped close around the door of the prison, while half-masks concealed the lower part of their faces.

The sheriff cast one glance on this threatening demonstration, and then sprang resolutely forward, brandishing a formidable club.

"Make way there," he cried fiercely. "In the name of the law, make way!"

"You shall never take that thief away from this town," yelled a shaggy-haired fellow who opposed him.

"Won't I?" cried the sheriff. "Bring him along, Joe."

He strode forward. His opponent raised his hand to stop him. One blow of the club, and the fellow went down as if he had been kicked by a horse.

In the next moment a fierce affray was in progress. The two officers, with the prisoner between them, strove to force their way through the mob, blows fell to right and left, and blood was running from more than one face and head.

Several had gone down before the club of the sheriff.

Yet the crowd was too dense and determined. The officers were forced back, step by step, while one stalwart fellow, slipping behind them, seized the captive and jerked him out of their custody.

Tom resisted, but a half dozen hands grasped him, and he was hauled into the midst of the masked mob.

The officers, seeing what had happened, turned, and strove to fight their way toward the prisoner.

At the same moment a shrill cry was raised on the skirts of the crowd, and a band of youthful forms, with whom were mingled some men, rushed vigorously forward.

"To the rescue!" came in the voice of Will Carson.

"In the name of the law!" cried another voice.

"In the name of the law," echoed the officers, as they fought their way toward this reinforcement.

The fight now was fierce and general. Cries and yells rose from the combatants, hard blows were given and returned, the boys fought like young tigers, and ere long a dozen forms were prostrate on the earth.

The sheriff and constable had both been felled more than once. But with indomitable courage and energy they gained their feet again, and broke their way through to the band of their friends.

At the head of this party was a stranger to the people of the town. He had suddenly appeared, inquired into the trouble, and at once taken the lead.

Who he was, nobody knew, but he fought fiercely. "No revolvers!" he cried, knocking a leveled pistol from a hand near him. "Fists and clubs, but no bullets. We must have him out, boys, but don't let us add murder to murder."

He sprang forward, followed with cheers from his followers, and ably seconded by the Dover officers, and by a dozen others.

But the opposite party had grown till it numbered full fifty men, while the prisoner was in its center, hustled to and fro in the movements of the combat.

"On them!" shouted the leader of the rescuing party. "Follow me! One break and we have him! Come!"

A surge followed that took the youthful rescuers deep into the party of masked lynchmen. But they could go no further. The serried mass which had for a moment yielded to their vigorous impulse, closed its ranks again, and forced them violently back.

At the same time hurried movements took place in the rear.

"They are dragging Tom away!" cried Will Corson, with eager energy. "They are going to carry him off! To the rescue, lads, to the rescue!"

He led the way, followed by his friends. The constable and sheriff sprang before him, striving to force a passage through the crowd. The stranger ran to the left, followed by a half-dozen stalwart men, seeking to turn their flank.

But they spread out until they occupied the street from side to side, presenting vigorous opposition at every point.

Meanwhile the prisoner had been dragged back into the dark street beyond, and in the hands of a dozen strong men was being hurried rapidly away.

Five minutes of hard fighting succeeded. At the end of that time the two officers broke through the opposing line, leaving a half-dozen men prostrate on the ground.

Their followers swept through after them like a wave.

"This way!" was the eager shout. "Lively, lads, they cannot be far ahead. We will save Tom yet."

Will Corson, his face streaming with blood from an open cut on his forehead, dashed forward at the head of the youthful phalanx, like a young hound that has scented the game.

The stranger who had rendered such efficient service ran down a side street, followed by the men of his party.

Yet at this point Mayville was cut by several streets at different angles, and it was impossible to tell which had been taken by the lynching party.

No trace of them was visible, and the eager search made failed to reveal them. Street after street was traversed, the whole town and the outlying roads were searched, but without success. The lynchmen had succeeded in making way with their prey, and had concealed him in some safe place not evident to the searchers.

At the end of twenty minutes' search the pursuers halted for conference. A shrill whistle called the stragglers together, and in a few minutes more the mass of them were gathered in the center of the street.

"The party at the lock-up has dispersed," cried one of them, coming hastily up. "There is not a soul there. The street is silent and deserted."

"They have evidently played a set game on us," said a second. "Where have they taken the boy? To the woods, or to some stronghold?"

"If to the woods it can be but to hang him without trial," exclaimed a voice in alarm.

"I just saw some of them going down the Dover Road," announced a new-comer.

"I bet high I know where they're gone," cried Will Corson. "Follow me, lads, we'll rescue him yet."

"Where is it?"

"To Thompson's stone mill. That's the only place strong enough for a jail."

A rush took place after his eager footsteps.

The place in question was half a mile off. It was now quite dark, but all present knew the way as well by midnight as by noon. Few minutes brought them to the vicinity of a dark, threatening, stone mass, which stood removed from any other building.

It was dark, however, but by comparison, for lurid lights played upon its walls, bringing it out in ghostly prominence.

And shadowy figures flitted to and fro around it, revealed by the light of numerous lanterns.

"Halt!" came a stern challenge, as the party approached.

The click of a dozen rifle-locks followed.

The pursuers hastily obeyed, and looked forward to measure the situation.

It was a threatening one. Full fifty men, armed with rifles, encircled the mill, facing in every direction, while sentinels guarded every door and window.

"You had best go back," said a loud, stern voice. "We were only playing with you at the lock-up. We mean business here. The thief is in our hands, and there he is going to stay till he is tried and judged. Go home, boys, and go to bed. You have men to deal with."

A short altercation succeeded, but it was evident that the speaker was in earnest. An attempt at rescue would cost the lives of twenty citizens.

The leaders of the rescue party withdrew for consultation.

"We can't get Tom, but we can keep them from taking him to the woods to hang him," cried Will. "Let's get our rifles, and make a circle outside. If shoot's the game, we can shoot, too. We will lie in the dark, while we can see all their movements. If they try to harm Tom there, I'm going to shoot, no matter who's hurt."

This suggestion seemed a good one. Guns and rifles abounded in Mayville, while revolvers were as plentiful almost as potatoes.

The plan was at once put in execution, some staying on guard, while others went for their weapons.

Within half an hour's time an outer circle of armed boys and men surrounded the inner circle of armed men, each party resolved to fight to the death if it came to a fight.

Some of the boys had fathers in the party of lynchmen. Their feeling for Tom Bruce was so strong as to make them forget the ties of parentage. But

in most cases their own fathers had joined hands with them.

One thing was settled; the prisoner could not be taken to the woods and executed, as in ordinary lynching methods. Nor could he be hung outside the mill, for the rifles of the rescuers covered every point.

Yet within the strong stone walls of the mill any outrage might be consummated. In fact, noises were heard through the night on the upper floor of the mill, and lights shone through its windows. The sound of busy hammers echoed on the night air.

What they conjectured was actually in process of execution. Under the strong floor, under the high gable roof, an impromptu gallows was being erected, built of some strong beams which lay there.

"The thing's got to be did, but it's goin' to be did fair and square," said one of the builders, as he plied his hammer lustily; "the gallows is 'cording to law, and when he's swung off it won't be no make-shift."

Below, on the first floor of the building, a lynch court was in session, considering the case which they had taken in hand.

The prisoner was brought before them and questioned, but he refused to answer any further than he had already done.

"You give me no time or chance to bring my witnesses," he declared. "Without them I cannot clear myself. If you decide to murder me, I have no redress."

This appeal had little effect.

"He was found on the stolen hoss," was the decision of the court. "Hoss-stealin' is hangin', 'cordin' to our 'terpretation of the law. At day-break the prisoner at the bar shall be hung by the neck till he is dead, and may it be a warnin' to all hoss-thieves in these United States."

The stern watch continued outside. Yet the rescuing party did not content themselves with that. The sheriff and constable had already ridden off to neighboring towns for aid. Bidding their comrades to hold their ground firmly, they promised to bring them abundant assistance before morning.

The stranger who had aided so efficiently in the affray had also disappeared. What had become of him no one knew.

CHAPTER XIII.

NEW POINTS IN THE GAME.

WHILE the events just described were taking place, the Mayor of Mayville was surprised by an unexpected visit.

A gentleman called on him whom he had never seen before, but who was no other than the stranger who had rendered such efficient service in the effort to rescue Tom Bruce.

"You know what has taken place here this evening?" he asked, after some preliminary conversation.

"Yes."

"It is an illegal outrage, which you should use all the power of the law to prevent."

"Ah! you think so? Are you a citizen of Arkansas?"

"No, sir; I am from Tennessee."

"I might have known that, or you would have known that when an Arkansas lynching-party takes a job in hand, the law has to stand aside."

"But this boy is innocent. He must be saved."

"How do you know he is innocent?"

"Because I know that he is the victim of a trick, and that his reputed father, Jake Bruce, is at the bottom of it."

"His reputed father?"

"Yes. He is no more his father than you are. Secondly, I have evidence that Jake Bruce had a hand in the murder of John Huntly."

"The deuce!" cried the mayor, springing excitedly to his feet. "If you can show all that—But who are you, sir? What do you know about this business?"

"I am Edward Gordon by name, from Nashville, Tennessee. I know all about the mystery surrounding this boy, and I know that Jake Bruce has an interest in the murder of John Huntly."

"Ha!" cried the mayor, "that is the first light we have had on the matter. But why have we not seen you sooner? If you know anything about this matter, why have you concealed it?"

"Because I had nothing but suspicions. I was in Mayville a week or two ago, and tried to scare Jake Bruce into a confession, but failed to do so. He is too old a rogue for that. Then I made a search of the Huntly mansion."

"Did you discover anything?"

"Nothing but this scrap of paper."

He laid a torn scrap of letter-paper on the table.

"Well?" demanded the mayor. "What does that signify?"

"I recognize it as my own handwriting," replied Mr. Gordon. "It is a scrap from a letter which I had written to Jake Bruce several days before the murder."

"Ah! and that was found in Huntly's house? That is important. But then you are in correspondence with this ruffian?"

"Yes. I have told you there is a mystery. This mystery cannot be divulged yet. We have more important matters to attend to. I waited for fuller evidence concerning the murder. To-day I have gained it."

"Proceed, sir. Your story is very interesting."

"It is in the shape of a diamond-pin, which I myself gave to Huntly several years ago. To-day I saw it in the necktie of Tony Blink, the accomplice of Jake Bruce in this murder."

"Why, that is proof positive! You are prepared to swear to all this?"

"I am. These guilty men must be punished. That innocent youth must be saved."

"They shall be arrested at once," cried the mayor, eagerly. "I will send out the warrants immediately."

"And a flag of truce must be sent into the mill where the boy is confined. Those men must be made to delay action till we get a confession from the real culprits."

"Very good. We must act at once. Leave the arrest of the murderers to me. You must attend to the flag of truce business. There is no time to lose."

They separated, each to his assigned duties. The mayor sent deputies to the houses of the accused men, with orders to arrest them. If not found at home, a search for them was to be made through the town.

That they were not concerned in the conflict that had taken place, was well known. While the fierce fight for the rescue of the prisoner was in progress, Jake Bruce had not appeared. Nor had he since shown himself.

It was conjectured that he was somewhere drunk. But Mr. Gordon threw no light upon the matter by declaring that a trap had been laid by his reputed father for the destruction of Tom, whom he feared, and that he had purposely desisted from aiding in his rescue.

The night was well advanced when Mr. Gordon made his appearance again in the silent party of watchers. All was as he had left it. Near the mill armed sentinels were patrolling, their figures lit up by lanterns. In the darkness outside, heedless of the chill of the night, lay in ambush a noiseless but vigilant band of youthful wardens.

A short conference ensued between Mr. Gordon and some of the leaders of the party. Ten minutes afterward two persons advanced, with a white flag, on which shone the light of a lantern.

As they drew near the mill, they were checked by an armed sentinel, with leveled rifle.

"We must see the leaders of your party," cried Mr. Gordon. "Something of importance has been discovered during the last hour. We are on the track of the real criminals. The boy in your hands is innocent."

This demand and statement were taken into the mill, and after some delay word came out to admit the envoys.

Bearing their flag of truce, the two men, Mr. Gordon and Mr. Wilson, entered the mill.

It was a picturesque scene on which they gazed. Men were lying or sitting at all points on the floor, their rifles ready at hand, the candle-light playing upon their shadowy forms, while darkness rested in the recesses of the large apartment.

In the center was a group of five or six men, to whom the envoys were led.

A conference ensued, in which Mr. Gordon repeated what he had told the mayor, and declared that within the next hour the real culprits would be in custody.

"You say the boy is innocent," declared Colonel Brown, who formed one of the party. "If so, will you explain how he came to be caught on my horse?"

"He was entrapped into it. He had nothing to do with the stealing of the horse. He was on a journey to Tennessee to see me, and expected to leave the horse where he had found it."

"That is that fairy story over again," cried the colonel, incredulously. "Who laid the trap for him?"

"Jake Bruce."

"His father? That will not go down."

"I tell you that Jake Bruce is not his father. I can prove it to you."

"You must prove that he is a murderer and a horse-thief, too. The boy was found on the horse. That is our case. Is not that so, gentlemen?"

"Yes," came the stern answer from a dozen mouths.

"Jake Bruce and his confederate will be arrested within an hour," rejoined Mr. Gordon. "They shall confess the truth. I know how to make them. But, time is necessary. That innocent boy in your hands must be held intact till this matter is put through."

"That will do," said the colonel, firmly. "We have heard your case. Retire outside for the present while we consult upon it. You shall have our answer as soon as we have come to a decision."

A conference succeeded, which lasted for half an hour. At the end of it the envoys were brought back.

"What time do you need to seize those men and force them to confess?" demanded Colonel Brown.

"It may take a considerable time. We may need till noon to-morrow."

"If it can be done at all, five hours are as good as ten," was the firm answer. "We will grant you till nine o'clock to-morrow. If the proof is not forthcoming then, to our satisfaction, the thief, Tom Bruce, shall be hung. That is our final answer."

Meanwhile the mayor was busy outside. He had roused up and sent out his officers with warrants for the arrest of Jake Bruce and Tony Blink, ordering that they should be brought before him at his office as soon as taken.

The officers proceeded to the houses of these individuals, expecting to take them without trouble; but neither of them were found at home. They had both left their houses shortly before the affray at the lock-up, and had not returned since.

The various drinking saloons in the town were next visited, but with equal ill-fortune. Neither of them were to be found.

These places, indeed, were deserted, all their usual occupants being with the party at the mill.

The officers continued their search, but with equal ill-fortune. No trace of either of the men was to be found anywhere in the town. It began to look as if they had taken the alarm and fled.

In order to understand what had actually become of them, we must go a little back and consider their movements.

We have already seen that they had taken no part in the exciting events of the day and evening. It was not for want of vital interest in these events. They had mingled with the people of their own degree, Jake declaring loudly that it was a conspiracy to make way with his boy, and that it wasn't in Tom to steal a horse.

When the affray of the evening took place they were on the outskirts of the crowd, and had advanced, indeed, to join the party of rescuers, when Jake laid a warning hand on Tony's arm.

"Guv it up, Tony," he whispered hoarsely. "That game's played."

"Why?"

"Don't you see? He's thar, by thunder!"

He was pointing to a man who had just appeared in the throng. It was the stranger, Mr. Gordon.

"What fatches him here?" asked Jake, hoarsely.

"Tain't arter no fun fur us. We've got to keep our eyes skinned, Tony, fur the Old Nick's loose."

Tony was shaking with fear.

"He threatened you when he was here before?"

"Yes. That's what made me push this job through with the boy. He's back ag'in, durn him, and I'm afeard this bizness 'll make him snap the lines."

"What's to be done, Jake?"

"Watch him. It's that Huntly bizness that fatches him here, Tony. I'm afeard he's on the track o' that."

The confederates anxiously observed the events that succeeded.

When the watchers gathered around the mill, they stood in the background, eagerly observing.

"Looks squally for Tom," whispered Tony.

"Thar digs out Gordon," cried Jake, suddenly. "What's he arter now? We got ter foller him, Tony. He's our meat."

They did so, with great caution, until they had tracked him to the house of the mayor.

"The dog's dead now," declared Jake. "If we don't want our necks stretched we've got ter slide, and that lively. We'll be snatched afore an hour if we stay here."

"Run for it!" asked Tony.

"Run fur it, my cove. If you wanter stay and be scragged, all right, but old Jake Bruce weren't born no fool."

"I have no money," said Tony.

"Then sneak back home, rake up all you can, and peg out. I'm off now. Got no time to spare. We'd best foller different ways."

Jake meant all he said. Without heeding what became of his companion in crime he started at once, leaving the town by the eastward road.

He had more in view than he had revealed to Tony. His journey led over the road which Tom had pursued on his mysterious excursion, and its first stage ended in the grove where the horses had been found.

It was now past midnight, and very dark.

He entered the grove, however, groping his way with difficulty through it, until he had reached a point near its center.

"That's the stump now," he declared, as he stumbled and caught himself. "The tree must lay off hereaway."

Carefully feeling, his hands soon fell on a huge, rugged trunk. This he followed with his hands to a point near the trunk, where the bark gave way to a softer material.

With a chuckle of satisfaction he pulled out a large handful of moss, which had been thrust into a cavity of the tree.

Inserting his hand now, he thrust it far in, and drew it out holding an oil-skin package, which seemed to contain papers.

A cry of satisfaction came from his lips.

"I bet I make somebody knuckle down," he said. "Them dockments is all safe, and here's fur Tennessee. Ain't goin' to stay in these diggin's to git scragged; not if the court knows herself."

He now left the wood and pursued his way along the road, concealing his prize within an inside pocket.

The night was dark, however, and his progress very slow. Later in the night he crept into a haystack and slept for several hours. He had made but about ten miles of distance.

Obtaining some breakfast the next morning, he pursued his journey.

His mode of life had made him anything but a brisk walker, and at nine o'clock he had added but about five miles more to his distance from Mayville.

"A mile more 'll fotch me to Jimson's," he said.

"Thar's a hoss and wagon waitin' fur me there, and I'll spin the rest of the way lively. Jake Bruce ain't no fool of a road tramp, no how you kin make it."

Had he known the terrible fate that was in wait for him he would have sunk to the earth in horror.

On the western sky there lay a strangely lurid cloud, of frightful aspect.

But of this he saw nothing, and tramped steadily on, unaware that the hand of doom was upraised behind him, and that Providence had prepared a terrible retribution for his crimes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HAND OF HEAVEN.

THE morning dawned, and the hours slowly moved on toward that fatal limit fixed for the execution. Yet none of the new evidence which Mr. Gordon had promised was yet forthcoming.

He had connected Bruce and Blink with the murder, but no proof was adduced that they had anything to do with the horse-theft. And they were not to be found. The most diligent search had not succeeded in discovering them.

The hour of nine approached. That terrible watch and ward was still kept up around the stone mill. The surrounding party were determined that none of the lynchmen should leave the mill. But they dared not make an assault. The men who lay behind those stone walls could have defended their stronghold against ten times their number. And there was nothing to hinder their putting their fell purpose in execution within the mill.

Mr. Gordon appeared in deep distress. He evidently felt deeply for the culprit, and would have taken any measures for his release. But what was to be done?

As nine o'clock drew near he requested another interview with the lynchmen, under a flag of truce. The request was refused. Unless he could put the real culprit in their hands, with positive proof, nothing further was to be said. Tom Bruce would be hung at nine o'clock.

Mr. Gordon withdrew in distress. As he did so he looked at the western sky. It presented a singular appearance. A lurid gray, half light, half darkness, overspread the horizon, with an ominous aspect.

He gazed at it a moment in wonder. Was some convulsion of the elements at hand—a tornado or cyclone? Was the dreadful deed about to be consummated reflected in the heavens?

He had little time for thoughts of this character as he hurried onward, in a half-distracted state. Another person followed him—Will Carson, Tom's fast friend.

What their object was they hardly knew themselves, but on reaching the edge of the town they perceived a dense cloud of dust in the road, as of some cavalcade approaching.

In a minute more a gust of wind swept away the dust, and revealed a group of horsemen, who were riding forward at a rapid rate.

A pulse of hope throbbed in the hearts of the watchers.

"Who can they be?" asked Mr. Gordon.
"That man at the head is the Dover sheriff," said Will. "They are coming back with reinforcements."

It was indeed a party of law-abiding citizens whom the sheriff and constable had enlisted in the neighboring towns.

In five minutes they rode up to where the hopeful watchers stood expectantly waiting.

There were some sixty in all, every man armed, and their faces full of resolution.

The sheriff drew rein on perceiving Mr. Gordon.

"Are we in time?" he asked.

"Yes; but you have but five minutes to spare. They threaten to hang the prisoner at nine o'clock."

"We must save him. We have a captive here whom we believe to be the thief."

He pointed to one of the horsemen, behind whom was mounted the spare form of Tony Blink, his hands tied, and dreadfully dejected in the face.

"We picked him up on the road, seeking to escape from the town."

"On, then! There is not a moment to spare."

The horsemen swept forward through the streets of the town, followed at a run by two footmen.

As they advanced, Mr. Gordon noticed that the threatening aspect of the sky was redoubled. The lurid hue presented a frightful appearance. Below the clouds hung a dense black mass that seemed to extend nearly to the earth.

He had never seen anything like it before.

But there was no time now to study the heavens. The cavalcade had already reached the mill, and rode up boldly to the walls, despite the threats of the sentinels.

"Halt! or we fire!" came the stern warning cry.

"We want the boy you have in there; and by the Great Jehovah we will have him!" cried the sheriff, springing from his horse, and darting boldly through the open door of the mill.

A rifle-shot cracked and a bullet sped past him, but it failed to arrest his steps.

"Stop!" he yelled, facing the men within. "The boy is innocent. I bring you the real thief. Stop! or for every shot fired a man of you shall hang."

His sudden entrance, and these words caused a moment of irresolution in the defenders of the mill. Ere they could recover it was too late. Twenty of the horsemen had followed their leader into the mill. Others were crowding after. The sentinels outside were prisoners.

"Your captive!" exclaimed the sheriff. "We must have him! Where is he?"

At that instant a clock in the mill began the stroke of nine.

"You are too late," declared Colonel Brown boldly and sternly. "He is swung off at this minute. The gallows has got its dues."

"By Heaven, boys! we must stop this!" yelled the sheriff, rushing for the stairs. "He cannot be dead yet."

"Hold your level!" screamed a voice at the top of the stairs. "If you take two steps more you are a dead man."

The sheriff looking up saw the muzzle of half a dozen rifles staring him in the face.

Bold as he was, he retreated.

"The boy is innocent," he cried. "Cut him down instantly. I have the real thief here."

"That cat won't jump," roared the man on the stairs. "We've got the right thief, and all Arkansas can't save him."

"Ready, men! Fire! Charge!" yelled the sheriff. A fusillade of rifle-shots rung through the room. Twenty men rushed for the stairs. But at their

head the defenders stood unmoved, their fire reserved.

"Another step, and half of you go down!" roared their spokesman, fiercely.

The assailants recoiled. Death too evidently stared them in the face.

It seemed that Tom Bruce was doomed. His rescuers had come too late.

At that instant, outside the mill, a terrific tumult was heard, as if a dozen thunder-claps had broken all at once. Cries of terror resounded. The men near the door ran hastily out in affright. The uproar was deafening.

While these events were transpiring below, in the upper story of the mill a frightful work was in progress.

What had been said was true. As the stroke of nine approached, the youthful prisoner stood under the impromptu gallows, his hands and feet bound, the noose of a rope around his neck, while a dozen hands held its other end, ready to swing him up at the signal.

The face of the victim wore a grave and serious, but not a cringing aspect. There was no sign of flinching on his part.

A confession of his crime was demanded, but he had but one reply:

"I die innocent," he said. "I have already told my story. I have nothing to add to it."

"You stole the horse and rid it away," said a rough fellow. "You can't deny that. And that's a hangin' job in Arkansas."

"Who helped you in it?" demanded another. "Give us the names of the gang, and we'll let you off. Hadn't your father, Jake Bruce, a hand in it?"

"I am innocent," repeated the prisoner. "That's all I can say, except you give me a chance to prove it."

"You know something about the Huntly murder. Tell us that, and we will grant you a reprieve. You saw something that night. What was it?"

Tom made no answer. He let his face hang until his chin touched his breast, and stood in silent meditation, or silent prayer. He had nothing further to say to his tormentors.

At this moment an uproar arose without, the sound of voices and hoofs filled the room.

A man at the window shouted:

"It's the sheriff with a company of mounted men at his back! They are charging on the mill!"

"There's no time to be lost!" cried a second.

"They have forced their way in."

As he spoke, the clang of the clock was heard above the uproar. It was striking the fatal hour.

"Swing him off!" cried the guard on the stairs.

"They are about to attack."

Yet the men at the rope hesitated. They seemed irresolute. The dread of the law at that moment overcame them.

Simultaneously there came the rattle of rifle-shots, the rush on the stair, and the retreat.

"Do your work!" yelled the ruffian on the stairs.

"We can't hold out long. Don't let the thief escape."

A rush of the men with the rope followed. The youthful victim was swung from the floor and hung in mid-air, his body writhing, his face purple.

The rescuers had come too late. The victim of lynch law was suffering the sentence imposed.

The executioners fastened the rope and left him writhing in the agony of death.

Force and fraud had triumphed over innocence. Jake Bruce's devilish plot seemed successful. Death was in the face of his victim.

Yet Heaven did not intend that such a wrong should be consummated.

At that fatal instant a distant roaring sound was heard, which grew in volume with terrible rapidity.

The men present looked at one another with frightened eyes. The most timid rushed for the stairs. That strange and dreadful noise was enough to make the stoutest blanch.

Little more than a minute had passed since the culprit was swung from the floor. Less than a minute had passed from the first sound of the tumult of the elements, ere it fell in its full fury upon the roof of the mill.

It sounded as if all the thunders of the heavens had crashed at once on that devoted pile.

The roof rose like a feather, and swept off through the air. The gallows was jerked from its fastenings and the rope torn loose.

It was the outcome of the strange aspect of the sky, which had attracted Mr. Gordon's attention.

A tornado had descended upon the building, its approach unobserved by the combatants until too late to escape its fury.

The frightful whirl had swept through a corner of the town, tearing two or three houses into fragments.

Over the devoted mill moved the very center of the snake-like cloud, which, with indescribable fury, licked and swept up all before it.

A great tree near the mill was twisted off near the root, and lifted far into the air.

The roof of the mill went next, while the stones of its walls were hurled to right and left with the fury of cannon-balls.

A score of the combatants were hurled to the earth, some of them slain outright, others maimed.

The gallows, as we have said, was torn loose and whirled up into the air.

The hanging boy followed it.

By a miraculous stroke of fortune the first effect of the whirl was to loosen the rope from his neck.

It was jerked violently over his head and hurled far from him.

Like a feather Tom's body, dead or insensible,

was whirled upward into the air, and carried away in the heart of the frightful wind.

Yet where he was going, or what had happened to him, he knew no more than did the sticks and stones surrounding him. He had no more consciousness left than the fragments of timber which soared above him.

Onward swept the tornado, mile after mile across the country, demolishing buildings, twisting off trees, making fearful havoc in every foot of its course.

Nothing in nature exceeds in fury these frightful convulsions of the wind on our western plains.

Fifteen miles away, as was related in the last chapter, Jake Bruce was pursuing his flight. All his schemes had been successful. With the papers in his pocket from which he seemed to have such promising hopes, he pushed onward. In a mile further he would be able to obtain a vehicle that would carry him safely beyond the reach of danger.

He felt that he was yet unpursued, and his spirits rose accordingly.

Blind fool! man pursued him not, but Heaven was on his track. Retribution was approaching.

The same convulsion of nature which had torn his destined victim from the hangman's rope, was following his fleeing footsteps, with vengeance in its grasp.

The wretch, who was passing under the shade of a dense growth of bushes, failed to see the pursuing cloud of the tornado until it was close upon him, and its tumult in his ears.

Then he looked around in terror, saw that frightful thing swooping down on him like a dreadful monster, and ran in an agony of fear.

He stumbled after a few steps and fell headlong. Ere he could rise the tornado was upon him.

Yet he had fallen into a small hollow which partly protected him, and the whirling wind, which was tearing the bushes in fragments around him, passed over without lifting him from his shelter.

The worst of the wind was past, and he was yet safe. As the rear of the storm came on, and the violence decreased, he strove to rise, deeming himself safe.

Fragments of timber showered around him, escaped from the uplifting force of the spiral whirl.

And then, like the swoop of a terrible bird of prey, a dense mass descended upon him, crushing him to the earth.

He fell to the ground stone dead, the blood pouring from his throat, his neck nearly severed by the terrible blow.

It was the gallows which had been erected for his victim which had fallen upon him, and crushed him almost out of the semblance of humanity.

The vengeance of Heaven indeed had descended upon the doomed wretch, fated to perish himself by the gallows which his villainy had erected for his son.

A moment after another object fell near him, striking the earth with a light thud. It was the body of Tom Bruce, carried that far in the storm.

CHAPTER XV.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE MYSTERY.

THE tornado had done terrible damage. Fortunately its course had been through the edge of the town, yet even there twenty buildings had been wrecked, and several of their occupants seriously injured.

The mill was a strong stone structure, yet it had suffered considerable damage, its roof going, and its upper walls being torn and fractured.

Fortunately the floor of the upper story held its own, and the crowd of men who were collected there escaped.

But of those who had handled the hangman's rope not a man got off free. Two were killed outright, and the others seriously hurt by the falling stones.

Outside the mill a number were injured and two or three killed. Several of the horses had suffered the same fate, while the others had stampeded in affright.

Among those injured and carried into the mill was Tony Blink. He had received a fatal blow from a falling stone, and in his pain and terror yelled out the secret of his misdeeds.

"Oh, I am a dead man!" he screamed. "God's hand has struck me down for murder and theft. I deserve it all! I deserve more! To leave this boy to be hung for our crimes! Oh, it was frightful! Me and Jake Bruce, Heaven is after us both!"

It was evidently an excellent time to get the truth from him while his terror lasted. Judicious questioning brought from him the story of the horse-theft, how he had himself stolen the colonel's horse, aided by Jake Bruce, and had tied it in the grove where the boy was to find it.

When questioned about the murder a spasm of terror shook his frame, and he denied all knowledge of it.

"Do you wish to die with a lie on your soul?" asked Mr. Gordon, sternly. "You may as well tell the truth, for we know it already. You and Jake Bruce were seen out together that night. A scrap of paper which was in Bruce's possession has been found in the Huntly house. You yourself wear at this minute a diamond pin which was the property of the murdered man."

With a wild cry the accused villain clapped his hand to his necktie, in which shone the pin alluded to.

"Denial will do you no good. The evidence is convincing. You are on the point of death. Clear your soul by confession before you die."

"It was Jake that stabbed him!" yelled the frightened wretch. "We only went there to get the papers. He attacked us. Jake killed him. I dared not peach on him."

"You have heard, gentlemen," said Mr. Gordon, gravely. "You perceive what a frightful crime you have committed in destroying that innocent boy. We must take this dying man's deposition. It will throw light on this dark affair."

What Tony Blink testified to, however, we will tell further on, in our general summing up. We must hurry forward to the denouement of our story. In following the track of the tornado, partly with the purpose of finding the body of the murdered boy, which had disappeared, a strange circumstance was discovered.

Tom's body was found, many miles from the town, and near it lay, beneath the massive framework of the gallows, a form that was mashed flat, and the head nearly severed from the body. The face was yet recognizable. It was that of Jake Bruce.

"Here is a wonderful dispensation of Providence," reverentially cried Mr. Gordon, who formed one of the party. "The gallows which was erected for the death of the victim has killed the criminal. He has met the fate he deserved, and fallen by the gallows. Can Providence have completed its work by saving the innocent? Let us examine the boy."

A moment sufficed to show that Tom's body was yet warm. No signs of injury were visible on his frame. The abrasion of the rope on his neck was the only mark.

"He is alive yet," cried Mr. Gordon, thankfully. "He may be saved. He must be put under medical care at once."

The insensible body was taken tenderly up, laid carefully on the bottom of a spring-wagon, and driven off to the nearest town.

Then the form of the dead man was removed from under the crushing weight that lay upon it. In doing so, a package, wrapped in an oil-skin covering, fell to the ground. Mr. Gordon hastened to pick it up and examine it. It contained papers, which he quickly opened and looked over.

A joyful expression came upon his face. "This settles the question of the murder," he said. "John Huntly was killed for these papers. I will keep possession of them till the proper time."

The body was taken back to Mayville. His companion in crime, Tony Blink, had died immediately after his confession. The two were laid together.

But at the same time joyful tidings reached the town. Tom Bruce had come to life! He was only insensible, but had suffered no serious injury. The minute's choking, and the whirl through the air had destroyed his consciousness, but it had come back again. He returned to Mayville before night, none the worse for his frightful experience.

On the succeeding day a group of the principal citizens of the town were collected at the office of the mayor. Mr. Gordon was present, and near him Tom Bruce, seemingly none the worse for his unlucky experience. Beside him sat Will Carson, holding his hand, and looking with pride and affection into his face.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Gordon, "I am the only man who can unfold the mystery of the events which have happened in your town. Yesterday I was not at liberty to do so. To-day I may be. I am awaiting a telegram which may leave me free to tell the whole story."

"The claims of justice require that the whole story shall be told as it is," declared the mayor. "We cannot consent to any concealment of crime."

"Wait till I have told you my story, and perhaps you may agree with me," rejoined Mr. Gordon. He took his seat in a chair facing the audience, who sat in hushed suspense. Their curiosity was intense.

"To begin," remarked Mr. Gordon, "I will say that the young man before us is not the son of Jake Bruce. Who he really is I cannot tell, yet. If he had known this I presume he would not have risked death to save a villain from the penalty of crime."

"He never treated me badly, even when he was drunk," said Tom. "And if he had I wouldn't have said a word to harm him. I thought he was my father."

"I will tell you my story," resumed Mr. Gordon. "Twenty years ago a family of a husband, wife, and infant son, lived in a town which I cannot name. The husband died. The wife married again in a year's time—much too hastily, as it proved."

"She was very wealthy. The wealth was her husband's, but was willed to her son, and was to be hers in case of the son's death. In that case the laws of the State would give her new husband great power over it."

"It was not long before this man showed his true character. A jealousy of the infant son was displayed. The child became sick, with indications of poison. The wife grew dreadfully frightened. She was in awe of her husband, who had a cold, stern, unrelenting disposition, and when suspicion came to her that he was again seeking the life of her child she dared not inform on him. Besides, the suspicion was of a kind that would have been of no value as evidence in a court."

"In her mortal fear she took a desperate resolution, as the only means of saving her son's life. She knew Jake Bruce and his wife, who lived near her. He was then a sober man, but one of ugly antecedents. As for the wife, she had received a great wrong from the gentleman in question—whose name I cannot give."

At this moment the narration was interrupted by the entrance of a messenger.

"I have a telegram for Mr. Gordon," he announced. "I have driven over with it from the office at Franklin."

Mr. Gordon seized the message, opened it, and read it a glance.

"Good!" he cried. "This removes the last need

of mystery. I can now tell the whole story, names and all."

Marked signs of approbation in the audience followed this announcement.

"I may now say that, instead of Tom Bruce, you now see before you Robert Austin, and instead of a poor Arkansas boy, the heir to a large property in Cincinnati."

Tom started up in surprise and pleasure at this, while a dozen crowded around him, shaking hands and offering congratulations.

"But for all that, I'm the same fellow I was five minutes ago," he said. "A new name and a fortune ain't a new body or a new character."

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Gordon. "That is well said, and I hope you will always remember it."

"Your step-father," he continued, "was named Paul Bent. Without going into details, I may say that your mother, fearing for your life, arranged with the Bruces to carry you away. The abduction was successful. The heir of the Austin property disappeared."

"Your mother, to throw her wicked husband off the track, made great show of grief, and spent much money in seeming efforts for your recovery. But at the same time she took care to keep pursuit from the right track, and to see that the Bruces were well provided with money. I was her agent in this latter task."

"Years passed on, many years. The husband wanted to give the boy up for dead, and to control the property. She would not consent. At length some unguarded words gave him an inkling of the secret. He at once began a persistent search for the abductors, though seeking to conceal from her his new knowledge and purpose."

"Mrs. Bert quickly divined what was afoot, and also that her husband was on the right track. He had hit on me as her agent, and placed spies on my movements, which led him to the discovery of the Bruces."

"Fortunately Mrs. Bert learned what was in train ere he could take any decisive measures. She at once warned me, and I advised the Bruces to seek a new home with the greatest secrecy. I chose the town of Mayville for this new home, at Mrs. Bert's request."

She had a purpose in this. John Huntly of this town was an old friend of hers, and she placed him on guard over her son and his reputed father, having learned of the dissipated habits of the latter."

"On my side I arranged a secret method of communicating with the Bruces, and supplying them with money. My meetings were with Jake Bruce at first, but as I wished to see the condition and learn the character of the boy for myself, I arranged to communicate with him directly, and have done so for a year and more past."

"You know my method from what he has told you. His journeys were made by night, so as to surround them with all secrecy. And that no one might have reason to suspect their purpose they were made on hired horses, which Tony Blink was engaged to leave in a certain grove on the night chosen for the journey. My meetings with the youth were made before daybreak in a grove on the Tennessee side of the Mississippi."

"All these precautions were necessary, for the spies placed by Paul Bert were very vigilant. In fact I now believe they were more successful than I had supposed, and that they tracked the quarry to Mayville at least a month ago."

This announcement made a stir of interest in the audience. Tom sprung half to his feet, and fixed his eyes earnestly on the speaker.

"There is one thing further to be told," continued Mr. Gordon. "Mrs. Bert, with growing dread of her husband, had deemed it best to put the papers relating to her son's property out of danger. She accordingly intrusted the will and other papers to Mr. Huntly, in whom she had the highest confidence."

"It is my belief that this was discovered by her husband, that he tracked the papers to John Huntly, and that this placed his spies on the track of the abducted boy."

"This I cannot be sure of. All the parties to it are dead, and it must remain a suspicion only, but it explains what follows."

John Huntly had more than one controversy with Jake Bruce on account of his drunkenness and ill treatment of his ward. These have been heard by parties in the town, and I imagine that they gave the first clew to the spies. He also probably let out to Jake Bruce the fact that he possessed those papers, and therefore had a right to keep some control of his actions."

"What I have to say now is conjecture only. I believe that Paul Bert had a private interview with Jake Bruce, and bought him over to his side by high promises."

"His first task was to rob John Huntly of those papers. In this enterprise he sought the aid of Tony Blink, who has confessed that they had been concerned together in horse-stealing enterprises. Their purpose in seeking the Huntly house was robbery only. Huntly awaking and attacking them, murder followed."

"I came to Mayville shortly afterward, saw Bruce, and from his actions suspected him, but failed then to gain any proof. But I believe now that the murder of the boy had been concocted between him and Paul Bert. Bruce refused to do this at first, but on learning that his ward had seen him on the night of the murder, fear added to his other reasons for making way with him."

"He thought I told about it after promising not to," broke in Tom. "But I would never have done that. It was Will Corson here that told it."

"And your supposed father thought it was you? That explains his effort to kill you in the grove,

which would have been consummated only they were frightened off."

"Oh, you don't think that!" said Tom, in horror. "I wouldn't let myself believe that! I tried to think it was somebody else."

"Tony Blink has confessed it," continued Mr. Gordon. "That effort failing, a new scheme was devised. They stole Colonel Brown's horse, placed him in the grove, and arranged for you to ride away on him. They even sent secret information which directed pursuit to Ivanstown. They were satisfied that the state of public opinion on horse-stealing was sure to bring to a sudden end any one caught in the act."

A thrill of horror passed through the assembly on reflecting how near to murder their violence and obstinacy had brought them. Silent vows were taken in more than one breast to never again interfere with the due process of the law.

"I need say little more," continued the speaker. "You know the rest. Man could not hinder you in your evil course, but Providence came in to rescue the innocent victim of your blind rage. The tornado saved him from the gallows. The tornado sent to his doom the wretch who was seeking to escape—the real murderer—who was flying with his stolen papers to claim the promised reward from Paul Bert. There was never a case in which the hand of God was more visibly displayed, and in which human wrong was more clearly set right by the justice of Heaven."

Silence followed these last words. All present seemed communing with their own hearts. They had been taught a terrible lesson—one which they would never forget. Tom silently pressed the hand of his young friend. He then rose and advanced to Mr. Gordon, with tears in his eyes.

"What do I not owe you?" he said. "You have won the gratitude of my whole life. As for Jake Bruce I thought I felt for him the love of a son for a father, and would have died myself rather than bear testimony against him. The thought of him is a horror to me now. You have opened my eyes. But for Mrs. Bruce, mother I have always called her, I cannot lose my affection. She is the only mother I have ever known."

"She is a good woman," answered Mr. Gordon. "She thought she was only doing what was right, and she had been deeply wronged by Paul Bert. You cannot be too grateful to her."

"But you have not told us all," broke in the mayor. "How was it that you could not reveal the mystery yesterday, but could to-day? What was the nature of the telegram you received?"

"I heard last night," replied Mr. Gordon, "that Paul Bert had been seriously hurt in a runaway accident. He had been thrown from his carriage. I read this as a newspaper item, and at once sent a message to Franklin to telegraph to Mrs. Bert. He has just brought me back this answer."

He opened the crushed telegram, and read:

"EDWARD GORDON, Franklin, Arkansas:—

"Paul Bert, my husband, died yesterday, in consequence of his accident. MARY BERT."

"Good! That clears the deck!" cried the mayor, excitedly. "Secrecy may be at an end then, and everything has worked out gloriously. Let me congratulate you, Mr. Austin—no longer Tom Bruce; I did my best to save you from hanging."

He grasped Tom's hand and shook it warmly. "And let me congratulate you," cried Colonel Brown. "I did my best to hang you, but I'm sorry enough for it to be forgiven."

He in turn shook Tom's hands as if he would pull both arms from the sockets.

And with the outburst of congratulations that followed we will drop the curtain on the scene, saying nothing of the Mayville illumination, the bands of music, suppers, and jollifications generally with which the town went wild.

It will suffice to say in conclusion that Tom—Robert rather—joined his true mother, whose tenderness and warmth of feeling were a thousand-fold greater for their long separation, and that he felt that he had never before known what motherly love was.

Mrs. Bruce, we need hardly say, was taken good care of, and Tom, despite his wealth, hating idleness, went into business in Cincinnati, with Will Carson as his business partner, the two boyhood friends becoming associated for life.

THE END.

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